THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

35¢ DECEMBER

THE ARDENT SOUL

by WILLIAM MORRISON

ROBERT ABERNATHY SAKI

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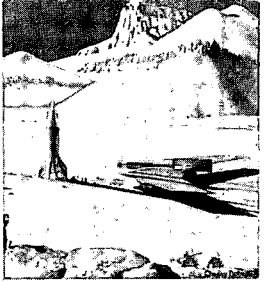

WE'RE ALWAYS PLEASED TO

bring you a cover illustration by Chesley Bonestell. And this month, we're five times as pleased as usual, for this cover is the first of a series of five Bonestell paintings of Mars which F&SF has acquired for use on its covers during the coming year.

These five illustrations are to be incorporated into a book about Mars to be released by Viking Press early in 1956. Like "Conquest of Space," this new publishing venture is the result of the collaboration of writer Willy Ley and illustrator Chesley Bonestell. Judging by the previous success of this duo we'll go on record right now with our prediction that publication of this book will be one of the scientific literary events of 1956.

To get back to this month's cover, "Exploring Mars," we can only say that we think it speaks for itself and for its artist. In this, as in all his work, Chesley Bonestell has utilized not only his brilliant imagination and trained hand, but a knowledge of architecture, astronomy, and higher mathematics that gives his already beautiful paintings the added dimension of reality.

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 7, No. 6 DECEMBER

The Fishers (*novelet*)	*by* ROBERT ABERNATHY	3
Special Talent	*by* CHARLES WEBB	38
The Seventh Pullet	*by* SAKI	43
Kalato	*by* EDWARD LEE	49
A Case History	*by* GORDON R. DICKSON	63
The Cat, the Brahmin & the Penitent	*by* FRANÇOIS AUGUSTIN PARADIS DE MONCRIF *translated by* R. BRETNOR	68
The Ardent Soul	*by* WILLIAM MORRISON	71
Time and Place	*by* ROBERT SHERMAN TOWNES	84
Recommended Reading (*a department*)	*by* THE EDITOR	89
Wish for the Moon	*by* GLEN HENEXSON	94
Totem and Taboo	*by* PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER	99
The Father-Thing	*by* PHILIP K. DICK	105
The Bourbon Lake	*by* JOHN NOVOTNY	116
Index to Volume Seven		127

Cover painting by Chesley Bonestell

Joseph W. Ferman, PUBLISHER *Anthony Boucher*, EDITOR

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I'll venture the guess that readers of the not too distant future will think most of our stories of spaceship flight as limited and meatless, as fiction, as we would find a story which was nothing but the detailing of a trip in an automobile. What matters in fiction is what happens to people, not the vehicle in which they happen to be traveling. But the spaceship may (like the ship or the airplane) occasionally produce an absorbing study in people, their emotional interplays and psychological reactions, which could not be written in any other setting — as Robert Abernathy shows in this powerful novelet of a space yacht, a financial dynasty . . . and a subtle, soul-destroying terror that lurks in the Asteroid Belt.

The Fishers

by ROBERT ABERNATHY

THEY HAD BEEN QUARRELING, in the luxurious central salon of Mrs. Loran Jordan's golden-hulled space yacht, *Morgan le Fay*. The *Morgan* was drifting lazily along, at about 60 miles per second, somewhere a little north of the plane of the ecliptic; she was in the neighborhood of the forbidden Asteroid Belt, but none of the passengers was worrying about that.

"All right!" snapped Harry Burk, stuffing knotted fists deep into the pockets of his expensive tan jacket. "You put it up to me? OK: the money goes into the Tethys development. Outside of a damn fool tradition, there's no reason why we should stay on Mars."

Mrs. Loran Jordan's face looked poutingly dubious, as well as it could through obliterating fat. Burk was quite certain, though, that she had wanted all along to unload the decision on him.

But — his gaze flickered from his mother-in-law to his wife — Ilena could be trusted to take up the cudgels. A disagreeable smile twitched the corner of Burk's mouth.

Ilena Burk had listened silently; now she sat up straight in her chair, her dark face revealing nothing. "The issue isn't tradition," she said levelly. "At best, an investment in Tethys is a long shot. Not that we can't afford to lose the money — but we've got the Company's credit to think about. Have you considered that, Harry?"

Burk knew better than to believe in her air of reasonableness. The look

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he shot at his wife's composed, impassive face — "statuesque," he'd called her in the days before he'd fallen out of love even with her money — was one of deep and time-tested suspicion. Ilena was no fat old woman contented with trying to squander as much as possible of her wealth before she died, no fatuous old woman glad to hand over a billion-credit corporation to the first adventurer who contrived to marry her daughter. Ilena was coolly intelligent, and more and more definitely she was Harry Burk's enemy. So far, at times like this, it had ended with Burk and Mrs. Jordan on one side, Ilena on the other. He had to keep it like that.

The child that was to be born wouldn't upset that situation. On the contrary. Burk could calculate to a nicety the effect on old Mrs. Jordan of knowing that Harry Burk's son (it had scarcely occurred to him to expect other than a man-child) would be her eventual heir.

But the funny thing was that he couldn't even make a good guess at the reaction of Ilena, who was going to be the mother of his son. . . . She was, if anything, more withdrawn and clueless than ever. Of course, though, they'd only known since shortly before this voyage began. In time, perhaps —

Mrs. Jordan's lips were quivering. Ilena hastened to deny her mother the relief of expressing her rearoused misgivings. She spoke again to Burk, on an almost placating note this time: "You're a gambler at heart, Harry. The long shots fascinate you. But you can't take chances with anything as big as —"

"You've often told me," he said to her as if they two were alone in the salon, "just how close you were to your father before he died, how much of his business sense you think you inherited or picked up. Maybe so, maybe not . . . Anyway, I know what your father was: just a hard-working guy that never saw the color of his own money. And I'm cast for his unworthy successor. Well, I like to see the color of my money; and as long as I'm managing Jordan Enterprises, we'll put 200,000,000 credits in Tethys!" He wondered if he was laying too many cards on the table, but a growing conviction that this was a showdown spurred him on to recklessness.

Mrs. Jordan's massive bosom was heaving with apprehension. She said, "What do you mean about the Company's credit, Ilena?"

"We have the liquid assets," said Burk angrily. "There's no need for borrowing."

"I mean," said Ilena, ignoring him, "that the Company's credit is very much involved. If we sink all that capital in a wild venture, everybody will think we've thrown away our only asset that isn't listed in the Commercial Register — management sense."

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Well done, damn you! thought Burk. He had an uncomfortable feeling that Ilena understood his motives very well — he'd never been one to fence or pretend — while he was largely in the dark about hers. . . .

Things had changed, and he was not easy about their changing. He'd married Ilena mostly, as he acknowledged to himself now, because a devil-may-care life on the planetary frontiers had netted him, financially speaking, nothing. Chance, the luck of Harry Burk, had thrown an heiress in his way, and he'd seemed to see the finger of Fate pointing to a life of security. Then the thought that he was already 31 — not old, certainly, but well past a spaceman's prime — had sometimes waked him in a cold sweat. Now he was 35, acting manager of the vast Jordan Enterprises since their founder's death . . . and of late he had read with brooding envy the news accounts of the first perilous landing on Pluto.

And Ilena had changed, frozen . . . But then she'd always been a cool sort, on the surface anyway. He didn't shrink from admitting to himself that she probably *did* have the shrewdest business head of those present.

Maybe later, when the baby came . . . a woman was after all a woman.

Old Mrs. Jordan was pursing her seamed, unskillfully painted lips in an attempt at an air of severe reflection. Finally she raised her voice: "Charles — what do *you* think?"

Charles Linforth glanced up, resting the periodical he had been reading on the arm of his chair. He smiled vaguely under his neatly trimmed mustache; his glasses gleamed, hiding his eyes. "I really don't know, Mrs. Jordan," he said deferentially. "I'm afraid I haven't been paying attention. . . ."

Burk's eyes followed the others', to the family group across the salon: Linforth's wife, a mouse of a woman who seemed overshadowed by her unimpressive husband, and their startlingly vivid blonde daughter, Leoce, who sat at a nearby table absently fingering over selections from the *Morgan's* film library.

Burk thought, *That man lies like hell. He's had his ears propped back till it hurt.* Linforth he knew for a clever man in devious ways, very clever — or he would never have been able to keep fast hold on Loran Jordan's coattails when the latter began his meteoric rise to the pinnacles of colonial finance. Even so, Jordan had almost shaken him off. He'd shaken him from junior partner to assistant treasurer — leaving him always the economically worthless title of friend of the family.

Ilena was saying cautiously, "We were discussing the Tethys scheme, Mr. Linforth. My husband has decided that he is strongly in favor of it."

Linforth folded his magazine carefully and laid it on the table at his elbow; he stared at his meticulously groomed fingernails for a moment

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or two. "Frankly, Mrs. Burk, I do not feel qualified to judge. Practically my only connection with the company at present is the collection of my quarterly dividend."

"But, Charles . . ." said Mrs. Jordan on a tone of weak remonstrance.

The door to the vertical emergency shaft to starboard — vertical, that is, in relation to the comfortable false gravity kept up by the idling power of the *Morgan's* afterdrive — was glass-paneled like the one on the opposite side, though only the latter shaft housed an elevator.

The man who came climbing up the emergency shaft, clinging to the steel ladder, threw a worried glance over his shoulder into the bright-lit salon. Charles Linforth's eyes, behind their thick glasses, caught the motion; he saw that the man was the ship's electrician, and that he was festooned with wires which trailed behind him down the shaft.

Linforth nodded quietly, significantly to Harry Burk, who turned in time to see the man disappearing up the ladder.

"What's up?" Linforth's eyebrows inquired. Burk shrugged.

"You know, Charles," Mrs. Jordan was saying plaintively, "this idea is — it means risking quite a lot of money. We must have your opinion. My husband always relied on your judgment."

Indeed he did, thought Linforth bitterly, down in the well-lidded cauldron that was always seething at the bottom of his mind. *He relied on my judgment to betray me, because I wasn't as shrewd as he was, nor — then — as ruthless. As soon as he smelled the possibilities in the Martian developments, he tied me up hand and foot before I realized what had happened. To be sure, I'm worth a couple of million now — but Loran Jordan made billions, and half of it should have been mine. He was a brilliant man, and I admired him intensely, still admire him almost as much as I hope that fiends are roasting his guts in Hell. . . . But you, you fat sow, you never knew where the money came from nor where it went after it ran through your fingers. And now you turn to me; you invite me to cruise Saturn's moons in your golden yacht, and to help you guide your golden ship of fortune . . . to shipwreck.*

Harry Burk said abruptly, "Excuse me," and went with long strides toward the nook that housed an intercommunication phone.

Linforth smiled inwardly. He liked Burk. Burk was a tool which that fat female fool and her daughter had placed in his hands, a lever that he would use to bring down the house that Jordan had built. . . . Always he was thinking of that coming destruction in concrete terms, as of things falling, breaking, exploding. Sometimes in the night he realized that he would never truly be satisfied, for Loran Jordan was dead and couldn't die again.

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"Well, Mrs. Jordan," he said studiedly, once more examining his fingernails, "if you insist on a snap judgment — One can't escape the fact that times are changing. Jordan Enterprises were built on the fact of colonial expansion. We've pushed the frontier forward with our capital and have reaped corresponding rewards. But Mars is no longer a frontier; in our own time the wave of colonization has moved on to the Jovian system and is currently overflowing the moons of Saturn. That we were anticipated by other interests in the Jupiter settlement might well appear now as the result of an unfortunate conservatism on our part. At present, we seem to face a choice: either of embracing the opportunities for investment in the Saturnian system, or of making fundamental readjustments in the Company's established *modus operandi*."

Ilena Burk spoke up, with her incisive manner which Linforth would have genuinely feared save that he depended on the emotional wreck of her marriage to render her harmless in the end. "A good point. However, if the Company needs new frontiers, it also needs to use intelligence in selecting them."

"The Tethys project seems to be to develop the satellite as a sort of resort, a low-gravity pleasure planet. I don't need to remind you that that kind of investment, when successful, gives many times the return of any other. Look at Lanz's Selenopolis — over half a million paid admissions to the Lunar Ballet alone last year—"

"However," said Ilena coldly, "it seems unlikely that the settlements around Saturn will be ready to disgorge hordes of idle pleasure-seekers any time within the next century."

Linforth moved restlessly to flick an invisible speck of dust from the sleeve of his coat, while he weighed his answer. He was scowling, behind the mask of his face.

Harry Burk came back from the phone nook. His footsteps, muffled by the heavy carpet, had the sound of haste in them.

Leoce looked up, making her manner casual, but letting the Earth travel film she'd been viewing (*Medieval Marketplaces in Asia*) roll on unheeded.

As always, she was mostly conscious not of any detail, but only of the total effect of his presence, his impact on her, the aura of adventure and glory in which for her he moved. His springy walk was a part of that, and the way his hands swung at his sides, casually but as if ready for action. When he glanced toward her, his eyes glinted with a luminosity as of rocket gases burning in space, red dust of battles in the Martian hinterlands. . . .

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She was seventeen and she knew that it was wrong to love another woman's husband — but, Leoce told herself fiercely, even before this cruise began she had seen how that woman treated him, that dark cold woman whose only thought was scraping and keeping money for her father's Company. . . . Oh, she could see through Ilena. She hadn't married Harry because she wanted him, but because the Company needed a man. The Company! Half-consciously Leoce gave the word an inflection like that which her father sometimes used when, in his own family, he spoke with precise bitterness of the Jordan Enterprises.

Harry's face wore a curious expression; an excitement that was touched with pleasure. His eyes were narrowed and he smiled a little grimly at the others.

"I've just been talking to Captain McKeown," he said briskly. "He tells me — rather reluctantly — that something's wrong. The meteor avoidance system has blown an important condenser or something like that, and we've been running blind for the last quarter hour. As close as we are to the Belt!"

Leoce sat petrified. At the moment it seemed unimportant whether anyone noticed her staring at Harry or not, even if they read what must be written in her eyes. . . . She heard a yip of fright from Mrs. Jordan, saw her own mother turn paler than usual, saw her father bite his lip. But what Leoce felt was more a reflection of the half-amused, stimulated look in Harry Burk's face. He looked . . . he looked as if he were tasting some familiar, long-missed sweetness. The sweetness of danger.

"The electrician's been rigging some kind of emergency circuit. He ought to be about finished by now. Anyway, the chances of our hitting anything, even here, are millions to one."

He said more, repetitively, in response to Mrs. Jordan's babble of questions. Leoce hardly heard; she was wishing that this moment, the moment of peril, would stretch out indefinitely. She could see that Harry gloried in it, amused by his own superiority to these timid ones. Well, let him look at her; he'd see that she too was unafraid.

She recalled a magazine story that she'd liked — a story of two lovers, trapped in a space ship out of control and falling into the Sun. The final scene had been so beautiful it almost made her cry. . . . But this was hardly the same; with a pang, she realized that if they *did* strike a meteor, they would be snuffed out instantly, with no time for goodbyes. And she couldn't say to him now: "Harry" — interpolating the name without conscious effort — "Harry, there's no use in pretending any more. Harry —"

Charles Linforth said, chewing his underlip, "This is a pretty big ship as space craft go. Mightn't it absorb an ordinary meteor and survive?"

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Harry nodded. "With luck, depending on the point of impact. The *Morgan* has approximately the tonnage of a third-class warship, but she's not armored. And a rock the size of your fist can rip open an armored dreadnought if you overrun it at the speed we're traveling."

"I understand that rocks the size of your fist are quite rare," said Linforth.

"Not around the Belt."

Leoce understood him, his knowledge, his fearlessness, even his cruelty that made him vaunt the other qualities without shame. She watched him with eyes alight, but he didn't seem to notice her.

Overpoweringly moved to say something, she asked, "What — what would happen if we hit a really big one?"

He looked at her, then; a faint smile twitched the corners of his mouth. "Then," he said, and a hand clutched at her heart as he seemed to echo her own thoughts, "we wouldn't even have time to say, 'So long, here we go!' So we might as well not worry about it."

And in that same second the ship struck a meteoroid.

It was against the probabilities; but that was no argument against the thing of iron and stone that came flashing out of the vacuum to heat the *Morgan le Fay.* A mere pebble as cosmic bodies go, it was a small asteroid, a million tons of mass. For perhaps a billion years, since the breakup of the primeval fifth planet, it had wandered in an eccentric orbit outside the major asteroid paths.

There was the beginning of a wild swerve; the vessel's electronic senses were dead and human reaction times were far too slow to avoid the impact. But the ship struck sidelong, glancingly.

It was all over in the merest fraction of an instant. Then widening miles of emptiness separated the stray asteroid, traveling almost undisturbed on its way, and what remained of the *Morgan*, where automatic emergency mechanisms were acting in a feverish battle for survival.

II

Cool dampness pressed against Leoce's aching forehead; she made a painful effort, and opened her eyes. The dark face of Ilena Burk swam out of indistinctness above her, and when Leoce brought it into focus she saw a purpling bruise on one of Ilena's high cheek bones. She became conscious that her body was stiff and sore, and that her head throbbed.

But she remembered everything, up to when some resistless force had snatched her up and flung her helplessly through the air. . . . Still, she was not surprised to find herself alive. She was used to being alive.

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"Maybe you shouldn't try to sit up right away," said Ilena matter-of-factly.

But Leoce sat up, though it made her head spin. She was on the floor of the salon; things looked fairly normal, because all the furniture was bolted down and still in place, but everything loose had been thrown hither and yon. The carpet was wet with spilled liquor from a decanter that still lay where it had rolled, two or three books were sprawled in a corner, a deck of playing cards covered the floor like autumn leaves, and looked as if they had been walked over.

"Where —" Leoce began. Then she saw Mrs. Jordan, slumped in one of the armchairs. The old woman's face was a sick color, and she was breathing hoarsely. Her clothing was disarranged, but she had no visible hurts.

Ilena glanced at her in response to the girl's look, and Mrs. Jordan caught her eye and made a pleading gesture with one limp, puffy hand.

"Ilena, dear," she begged in a wheeze. "I need some more of my medicine. If I don't have some more medicine my heart's going to stop. You've got to give it to me."

The younger woman straightened her back as if it hurt, and shook her head. "You've had two doses in twenty minutes, Mother. That's too much already."

"Where —" faltered Leoce again. Ilena turned back to her quickly.

"Harry and your father have gone down to the engine room. They think perhaps they can control the ship from there . . . or Harry does. He's the only one who knows anything about rockets."

"Control the ship?"

"Whatever we hit, we didn't hit it dead-on, or we wouldn't be here. But the front end of the ship is gone, just sheared away. The bridge is gone and with it Captain McKeown, the pilot, the navigator, and I guess the engineer — he must have gone up for some reason before it happened, because the elevator was up there and it's gone too. We found the electrician dead in the emergency shaft — electrocuted by some of his own wires —" For a moment Ilena paused in her recital, but she recovered herself swiftly. "It comes to this: We're out of control, without a crew or even a radio to call for help, and we don't know where we're headed."

"Oh," said Leoce. She was still sitting on the floor with her legs flung out at ungainly angles, tangled in her skirt. She pushed her blond hair out of her eyes and gazed up at Ilena. For the moment she had forgotten to hate Harry Burk's wife.

But with the mention of Harry — down there in the engine room now, coping heroically with the problem of how to fly half a ship — she began coming back to normal.

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She clutched at the floor, gathered her feet under her, and stood. She felt all right now, save for the headache. It came to her that she had been sprawled on the floor like that, disheveled and unconscious, for perhaps half an hour — and Harry had been in this room, walking around her as if she were an inanimate object. She didn't mind that; she wouldn't, she thought, have minded even if he'd stepped right on her; but the thought of how she must have looked froze her. She smoothed her skirt.

Standing up had called her attention to something else — she groped for the impression and pinned it down. "But we've still got gravity! How —"

"The engines never stopped," said Ilena. "What's left of the *Morgan* is still under way, under the same acceleration as before. But we're off course. Harry is going to try to rig some instruments; he's afraid we might be heading right into the Belt."

"*Ilena!*" gasped Mrs. Jordan from the depths of the big chair. "My heart!"

Her daughter replied only with a weary headshake, turned away toward the open door of the emergency shaft. "I'm going down and see how they're getting along. You rest a bit, Leoce, and look after Mother — but don't let her have any more of that dope."

She was at the door when Leoce cried out — her voice suddenly that of a lost little girl: "*My mother!* Where is she?"

She knew even before she saw Ilena's eyes shift to look past her, before she turned and saw the figure that lay motionless on a couch against the wall, covered from head to foot with one of Mrs. Jordan's fine tablecloths.

"Oh," she said stiffledly, and again, "Oh . . ." Then without turning her head she knew that Ilena had slipped silently out into the emergency shaft and was gone, leaving Leoce alone with her mother's body; Mrs. Jordan, wheezing petulantly in her chair, didn't count.

Leoce walked across the room and stood looking down at the slight, still figure under the ample shroud. She considered lifting the cloth, thought better of it.

Strange thoughts whirled round and round in her aching head. She had a sense of lightness that was not merely the aftermath of being stunned. She remembered her mother alive — a retiring, ordinary woman, without ideas, without — so Leoce had felt for some years — any remaining hold or influence on her child. . . . But now Leoce realized that she'd been deceiving herself; for her mother was dead, and she felt free.

That was wrong . . . but what did it matter, here in a wrecked ship plunging through space toward possible further disaster and death? What did anything matter, except . . .

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She raised her head; in imagination she saw her own blond young loveliness, and beside it the gaunt dark face of Ilena Burk, with cool eyes always questioning.

Those were not eyes, she thought, into which a man would want to look at a time like this. He would want someone as warm as space and death are cold. . . .

"Watch out, Ilena," she whispered fiercely to the image in her mind.

Ilena Burk went down the steel ladder swiftly, her skirt billowing out around her. Near the bottom it was warmer, and in the engine room, just above the still vibrant might of the rockets, it was hot.

Down here was another world. Sixty feet overhead, or forward as you thought of it, was the salon, a cradle of luxury straight from any of the big cities on Earth or Mars. Here you stepped from the ladder into mechanized Inferno.

Ilena had seen the engine room before, but never when the rockets were firing. Most of it was occupied by the crouching dull metal mass of compound breech, whose flanks rose sloping from floor to ceiling. That was the genius of the drive, which mixed atomic fuel and reaction mass, injected the mixture into the six-inch wolfram tubes and exploded it there with neutron bullets. It had labored on uncaringly through the collision which had left it only half a ship to propel, and it still labored. . . . The room was filled with the perpetual strong drone of a billion horsepower obediently at work.

Ilena's bare feet curled away from the warm metal plates of the engine room flooring — she had kicked off her shoes at the top of the ladder for better footing — and she had a sudden vertiginous consciousness of where she was, out in deep space, where even her weight was an illusion because really the floor under her was being lifted constantly toward her by the thrust of the flaming drive below. Her weight was greater than it had been, for the drive was the same while a third of the *Morgan's* mass had been wiped out.

Around the walls, and around the breech with its pier-like projections that were the beginnings of feeders to the injectors beneath, were subsidiary devices, indicators, controls, servo-checkers, servicing mechanisms, some glowing with signal lights, others dark. Air-pumps throbbed, adding to the noise; though the automatically sealing doors had saved most of the ship's atmosphere, it was still losing some through sprung seams.

Ilena's eyes sought in the tangle and found Charles Linforth where he knelt beside the auxiliary control board. The main control panel had of course gone into limbo along with the *Morgan's* bridge.

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He looked up when Ilena called. Sweat glistened on his high white forehead; his glasses had been broken in the smash, and his eyes looked weak and naked. He let fall the pair of pliers he held, and said over the bone-shaking drone:

"I can't get to those leads. If you catch up with Burk, tell him I don't think we can get to them without cutting. And I can't handle the torch with one hand." His left arm hung in a sling — again improvised from one of Mrs. Jordan's best tablecloths; the gold embroidered fringe was incongruous.

"Where is Harry?"

"He's up above," said Linforth. "He went up to the starboard gallery to try to determine our course by the stars. We found an emergency kit with some navigation instruments. So your husband went up to look at the stars, and left me here —" Linforth's voice shook, and he fell silent. Ilena stared at him, wondering how close he was to hysteria. His eyes wandered, he smoothed back his thinning hair with his good hand and picked up the pliers again, turning them nervously in his fingers.

"You seem to have run into trouble," she remarked, intentionally inane.

She could see Linforth striving to keep himself under control. "Quite," he said after a moment's silence. "Those leads — It seems, Mrs. Burk, that when the meteor hit us, this control board was dead as a matter of standard practice, since the panel on the bridge was in use. When a switch is opened there — I have this from your husband, who could explain it better — a relay operates somewhere to send current through this board. The bridge and the switch are both gone, of course, but the vital circuit is still closed — welded closed, somewhere in the wreckage forward. So we have to find the leads down here, and cut them; then perhaps we'll be able to steer the ship with the remaining directional rockets."

"I see," said Ilena, though she wasn't sure that she saw. She turned back to the ladder. "I'm going up and look for Harry; I'll tell him what you said."

Linforth nodded abstractedly and seated himself morosely on the metal hooding of a machine. As Ilena left he was still sitting there, staring down limply at the dirty fingernails of his good hand; his well-cut clothing was torn and smudged.

As Ilena went up the ladder, she gave a little distracted thought to Linforth. Something in his manner had made her uneasy — a hint of impending explosion, her feeling that he bitterly resented the accident and that somehow she, personally, was a target for his resentment.

But mostly her mind strayed back to thinking about Harry. She passed

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determinedly over the impulse to analyze her need to see him now; after all, she had legitimate reasons for seeking him out — to deliver Linforth's message, and because at this moment it was Harry, if anyone, who would know what their chances were. . . .

In the glassed-in observation gallery, Harry was bent over a begadgeted tripod, absorbed in twisting a vernier. The unbreakable glass here had flexed and buckled, and in spots was spattered with gummy black antileak. But countless stars still looked in, the brilliant stars of space.

However, something was wrong with the stars. They blurred and twinkled a little, waxed and waned momentarily in brightness.

Harry looked up, and perceived her bewilderment at the phenomenon. He explained negligently, with the irritating hint of amusement in his tone: "The ship hit sidelong and pinwheeled. When the automatic stabilizers lined its axis up with the line of flight again, it happened to be traveling tail-first — running through its own exhaust gases, which have been playing merry hell with my observations."

"Mr. Linforth asked me to tell you," said Ilena, "that he can't find the wires you had him looking for. He thinks you'll have to use the cutting torch."

"I didn't think he'd find them," said Harry calmly. "I've got to get back down there anyway — feed these bearings to the auxiliary computer. Praise be, it isn't on the control board circuit." Competently he began dismantling the instruments and stowing the parts in their case. He seemed undisturbed by the revelation that he was the only one left on board who knew how to do anything.

Ilena watched in silence. Now that she was alone with him, she seemed to have nothing to say, after all.

So she said, merely to break that silence: "Do you know our direction yet?"

Carefully he placed a limb of the tripod in its proper bed in the case. "I won't know exactly until I get those computer results. But I can tell you now that it doesn't look good. We're heading into the Belt."

"I see," said Ilena, and perhaps her voice shook a little though she willed it not to.

He snapped the instrument case shut and stood up. His hard blue eyes looked into her dark ones with a look of . . . amusement? searching? appeal? and he gripped both her shoulders in his big hands.

"You know, darling," he said unhurriedly, "it comes to me what a great time and place this would be for a dramatic reconciliation. Here we are, diving into the Belt, and it's a toss-up whether we hit another rock, or —"

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"You *like* that, don't you?" flared Ilena. She was unhappily angry at herself, at the conflicting tides of emotion drowning reason in her, but she went on almost automatically, "The toss-up. The long shot. And the big fight and the 'dramatic reconciliation.' "

He drew back a little, and his hands on her shoulders relaxed. "Skip it. I just thought some such idea might've occurred to you. I wanted you to know that if it had, I knew why. You've figured out, just like I have, that your mother either has changed her will already, or is about to — giving me control of the Company. You couldn't stand that, could you? You're even willing to accept me, to stay within grasping distance of the Company."

Ilena struggled to make her voice steady. "Aren't you putting me in *your* place?"

"Not a bit of it. It seems, from what I've picked up, that you and your mother haven't ever got along. But she's a lot more impressed with my sterling qualities — or phony glamor, if you prefer — than you ever were. If you tried divorcing me now — well, you might get the kid to yourself, though by God I'd fight that through every court in the System. And in any case you'd find yourself on an annuity — with no more chance to tell me how your father would have run things."

"My father —" Ilena began, and stopped short, not trusting herself.

Harry eyed her quizzically. "Take it easy," he said. "Got to think of Junior now, too, you know. . . . Don't worry; we'll come through OK."

His hands slid down her arms, tightened and drew her to him, and he kissed her on the mouth. For a moment she was straining to draw away; then she went limp, leaned shudderingly against him, returned the kiss. . . .

When he had gone Ilena stood there, shaken, hating herself. The cold stars of space stared through the cracked glass, stared in at her shame.

Poignantly she remembered her father. His name in Martian business circles remained even now a synonym for an almost uncannily shrewd intelligence. But he had been a simple man, almost pious in his way; sometime in his youth he'd heard that the gods help those who help themselves, and later on he'd helped himself to a good 30 per cent of Mars' undeveloped resources.

He had been a great man. Now he was dead. When Ilena could think coolly, without passion, nothing — certainly no desire of her own — seemed so important as to preserve the structure he had built, as he would have wanted. Now it was all the more important, because of the child that was coming — a boy who would inherit the Company, as Loran Jordan's son should have inherited it — the son who should have been born instead of Ilena.

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But she couldn't always think coolly. Sometimes she couldn't think at all. She was a woman. And that was why Harry Burk, reckless adventurer, irresponsible gambler, was in a position to wreck the great Jordan Enterprises.

As a final token of her weakness, she felt two tears trickle slowly, burningly down her face.

III

In the vibrant clamor of the engine room, Harry Burk straightened up from where he crouched beside the control panel. He mopped sweat from his forehead with the back of a grimy hand, shuffled his numbed feet; some of the litter of tools about him clinked together.

He had been working alone down here for a full hour, struggling with the maze of control wiring, since Charles Linforth's brooding had burst into open near-mania. He'd sent the man back up the ladder, feverish with the pain of his broken arm and muttering about best-laid plans and the hand of God.

Burk worked best alone, but there had been times when he wished for company, somebody to talk to. Ilena. But Ilena was up in the salon taking care of her mother's wobbly heart, and thinking, no doubt, what a louse she'd married.

His heaviest burden; since the computer had delivered its verdict, was the full knowledge of the danger they were running into — knowledge it would have been pointless to share, since he was the only one who could do anything about it. Now, though, after a heartbreaking hour in the stifling heat of the engine room, he had to admit that he couldn't do anything either.

He wiped his forehead again and turned; then he saw that he wasn't alone, after all. A slim figure crowned with pale blond hair stood half hidden between two of the piers of the great compound breech.

"Leoce!" said Burk without much surprise. "What are you doing here?"

The girl's pale eyes met his squarely — narrow, almost Mongoloid eyes that betrayed some of her ancestors' origin from somewhere on the Baltic Sea. "I've been watching you at work. Working so hard to save all of us useless, helpless ones . . ."

He smiled wearily. "Don't kid yourself. I've been trying to pull this derelict through mostly because Harry Burk happens to be aboard. But I seem to be pretty helpless, too. The people that built this boat believed in putting things together so they'd stay together till it was junked. But it never occurred to them that the front end of a ship might go off and leave the rear end to shift for itself."

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"Then does that mean — that there's no hope?"

He was surprised at how little frightened she seemed. "No. We just can't steer this damn wreck. We keep going, in a direction determined by our initial momentum, the push the meteor gave us, and the continuing thrust of the drive till the fuel runs out. If my stellar navigation still works, I think I have a close idea of *where* we're going."

She didn't miss the grim emphasis. She asked breathlessly, "Wh-where?"

"That's what I was just about to go up and announce to all the interested parties."

She grasped at his arm. "Tell me now — please!"

He gave Leoce a searching look from reddened eyes. . . . "OK. In about an hour, the *Morgan* will pass right through the middle of the Dupays asteroid swarm. Then she'll swing back out of the Belt again — south of the ecliptic, in the southern traffic lanes where there's a pretty good chance of being rescued."

But the girl hadn't really heard the last sentence. She recoiled a step, her slanted eyes widening in horror. "The Dupays!"

"I wondered if you were up on their history," said Burk evenly. "You won't be surprised to hear that I've caught myself halfway wishing that rock back there had finished us off."

Leoce nodded numbly. Everybody knew the story, revived from time to time in fiction and magazine articles, of what had come out of the Dupays cluster a generation ago, when the first exploring vessels had penetrated it. Since then, the whole Belt had been out of bounds for ships. But it was the Dupays group itself, the region toward which they were helplessly plunging, in which the horror was known to dwell.

Little enough was known beyond that, though altogether four ships had stumbled into the nests of the creatures of the Belt, whom someone had named the Fishers. The Crew of one of those craft had found the courage to blow it up. The others . . .

They had been hunted down, on Earth and Mars. Human bodies, no longer human. An alien intelligence looked out of their eyes and refused to answer questions.

When some of them were caught, they had been trying to outfit a fleet of freighters for an expedition to the Belt. Freighters equipped with the hold facilities and the engines to carry massive cargoes. The Fishers had failed in their purpose, because the men whose bodies they possessed had lacked the money for such an enterprise.

But they could hardly hope for a better catch than was contained in the derelict *Morgan le Fay*.

"What are we going to do?" asked Leoce in a small voice.

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"I don't know," Burk said bluntly. He gazed at the girl and past her, hardly seeing her; but it was a relief to unburden himself of his knowledge. "Once," he said darkly, "I talked to Pete Goda. You've heard of him?"

Leoce nodded again. Pete Goda had been a more than nine days' wonder: the only man who ever came back from the Dupays alive and — still a man. With two comrades as ignorant as himself, he'd tried to take an illegal short cut through the Belt. The other two had died — one whom Pete had been forced to kill outright, the other who had died before planetfall from the beating Pete's huge fists had given him to drive the unhuman consciousness out of his body. But Pete had somehow resisted whatever it was that seized on men's minds out there; and, back on Earth, had shut his mouth and refused to talk.

The story went, though, that he hadn't refused under narcosynthesis; but what he had said was a secret of the Earth Government. . . .

"Pete used to be a friend of mine," said Burk. "I hadn't seen him for years, when I ran into him one day in a — a café in Memphis. He was busy trying to forget what he'd been through, and the stuff he was using to forget made him want to talk instead."

"He told you about — them?"

"Yes. In his own language, though. Pete was religious — belonged to the Post-Scientific Church of Repentance, I think. It seems that the Dupays are inhabited by devils who try to steal men's souls. To begin with, one of them tempted him, most diabolically, showing him all the pleasures of Earth as a lonesome spaceman imagines them, offering him every desire he'd ever had — and some that he never knew he had. Pete gritted his teeth and thought of his soul's salvation — and the Fisher showed him Heaven in all its glory, with the gates wide open to receive him. It was so much like the real Heaven that Saint Peter himself would have been fooled, but Pete Goda, who was no saint, knew it was phony, and kept on resisting. Finally the thing must have got angry, because it used its hypnotic power to punish him. All he'd tell me about that part was that he'd spent a thousand years in Hell, and it was a lot worse than he ever expected it to be."

"But he got away," whispered Leoce, her hand at her throat.

The far-off look in Burk's eyes dissolved, and he gazed thoughtfully at her. "Pete had his faith to lay fast hold on," he said softly. "Think any of us qualify? What have we got up above?" He gestured toward the ladder. "A bunch of money grabbers that have spent their lives looting Mars to buy themselves gold-plated yachts. And down here? A girl that's so scared she's ready to shake like a leaf, and a guy that's sold his soul once already for that same damn filthy money."

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Leoce reacted violently. Her young face grew taut with the tenseness that precedes tears. She said chokingly, "But I'm *not* scared, Harry!" Then her arms were about his neck, her body pressed against his; she was crying, looking up into his face. "Harry, we can't get away, can we? Kiss me. We're going to die. I love you, Harry. Kiss me."

Now why didn't I see this coming? Burk asked himself. *I'm slipping.*

He bent and kissed her on the lips, but gently, as one kisses a child.

Too bad, he thought wrily. *Under other circumstances . . .*

Over Leoce's shoulder he glanced at his wristwatch. By his figuring there should be about 30 minutes left before they hit the Belt. Just about time to give the others the briefing — that might or might not do any good — about what they were in for.

He disengaged the girl's arms and held her a little away from him.

"Look, baby," he said soberly, "maybe this business is getting a little too much for you. We've either got about half an hour to live — but the hell of it is, you probably *don't* die — or else we'll come through somehow, and have all the time there is. But I'm a married man with responsibilities — too damn many of them," he added frankly. "And in twenty years or so you won't be able to tell me from a lot of other nasty, rich old men."

Leoce kept her eyes fixed on his face till he grew uncomfortable. It had been so long since he'd been looked at like that. His arm that was still around her shoulders tightened.

He said, "Everybody wants crazy things. . . . Do you know what *I'd* like to do? I'd like to sell the Jordan Enterprises at auction and buy myself a present. A ship. Not a gold-plated yacht, but a ship like there never was before, a ship that a couple of billion credits could just maybe build, a ship to go to the stars. Maybe it could be done . . . if old lady Jordan and her fake heart weren't going to live forever. . . ." He stopped and shook his head; he'd been talking to himself. "But that's a lot of crud," he growled, letting his arm slip from Leoce and jamming his fists into the pockets of his grease-stained jacket. "We're bound for the Dupays!"

"Th-thanks for telling *me* about it," stammered Leoce. She didn't mean the Dupays, she meant the interstellar rocket, and Burk understood.

For a moment his eyes hardened curiously as he looked at the girl, but the expression wasn't for her; he was thinking of Ilena's reaction to the same confidences, in the first days of their marriage. The splitup had begun right then. . . .

"Better fix your face a bit, baby," he told Leoce flatly. "We've got to go upstairs, break the news to the rest of them."

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What was left of the *Morgan le Fay* drove steadily ahead along its determinate curve through space — the remnant of a superb organism which, blind and crippled, could still go on. As near as a mile or two away, fragments of stone or of meteoric iron began to flash past, but there were no longer any detectors to warn of their presence, or any electronic brain to deflect the ship if one came dangerously near. But their threat was negligible compared to that which lay ahead, stirring, perhaps, already as it sensed the approach of victims.

IV

Mrs. Loran Jordan huddled deep into the cushions of her big chair, in her own magnificent salon aboard her own yacht that she had had built for 60,000,000 credits, covered with gold from nose to tail. She could feel her poor overworked heart beating fast and unsteadily, seeming from time to time almost to stop entirely. She wanted her medicine, she needed her medicine; but she knew hopelessly that Ilena would only shake her head brusquely. She felt almost too feeble to complain.

Ilena was a cold, unnatural daughter. She was her father's child, every bit of her. Ilena had never loved her mother and was willing to let her die now without a word of sympathy.

Harry Burk was still pacing up and down, his steps dull on the carpet. He had been talking fast, jerkily: ". . . So, we know where we are and where we're going. What more could we ask?" He smiled with humorless irony and looked round at the four others. "And," he appended, glancing at his watch, "we'll be where we're going in about ten minutes."

For a moment or two Mrs. Jordan thought her heart really had stopped. . . . Then she lay wheezing in her chair, cowering before the passage of the minutes, the seconds. On the wall of the salon hung a big ornate clock; she had chosen it herself, but she didn't remember what it had cost. It was a beautiful clock. But its second hand swept round and round, faster and faster, while her heart labored faster to keep up with it. And with each second that ticked away, the wrecked vessel plunged miles nearer to the Fishers' fishing grounds.

The others' faces seemed far away and strange. Ilena sat upright in a chair opposite her own; her slender-fingered hands were relaxed on the broad arms, but her relaxation looked painful, artificial. Charles Linforth stood leaning stiffly, his face a mask, against the wall beside the elevator shaft; he had recovered from his outburst of a little earlier, and had scarcely reacted to the news of their latest misfortune. As Mrs. Jordan watched, he raised his good hand in a nervous gesture to stroke his neat little mustache, saw the blackened fingernails and put his hand behind him again.

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Mrs. Jordan twisted her head a little and brought Leoce Linforth into her field of vision. The girl sat limply in the third big chair, and her charming features wore an expression which Mrs. Jordan could not fathom. Her mouth was sober, but there was an odd light in her eyes, a smooth untroubled look in her young face, that didn't fit the moment. She seemed to be somewhere else, unconnected with the tense gathering in the shattered rocket.

Harry was still pacing and talking, as if he had to. "They've been waiting for us a long time," he said. "Waiting out in the Belt since before the time of the first apes, maybe since before there was life on Earth. The scientists think the Dupays swarm was part of the crust of the old fifth planet. That planet had intelligent inhabitants, and when their world exploded a billion years ago they managed to survive after a fashion. They didn't have space travel, but they knew some things we still don't know. Their bodies were flimsy like any life — but they had some method of impressing the patterns of their minds on durable matter, rocks or metal, something that would have a good chance of surviving the smash. And they knew how to prepare those preserved minds to come out aggressively, when the chance arrived, to take possession of the bodies of future beings who might happen in their vicinity. Of *us*."

It was all only a part of the daze in which Mrs. Jordan was steeped, slumped in her armchair. She didn't want to come out of the daze. But her mind insisted on running about like a busy mouse trying to escape from a cage — the cage of gross, sagging, weary flesh with which the years had surrounded it.

That was another thing she could blame on her dead husband, when she tried. She had heard somewhere that rich, frustrated women get fat; and if Loran hadn't made her rich and frustrated, who had? When would he ever listen to anything she said? She knew she was a strong-willed woman, but that was her nature; Loran should have known how to make allowances. But he had always given her silently the money she asked for, gone his own way deaf and dumb, a quiet little gray-faced man good for nothing in the world but piling up more money. . . .

And then, worst of all, he had poisoned her own daughter's mind against her, her only daughter, the child she had borne at *his* insistence. He had schooled Ilena to hate her, and now in her old age she had nobody.

She opened puffy eyes again, unwillingly, on the horrid present. And saw Harry Burk, who had paused in his restless pacing and confronted the others, hands thrust deep into his pockets and shoulders squared.

"We've still got a few minutes left," he said. "I'm going to go back over my ideas about getting us out of this mess. We know that, whatever

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the Fishers' psychological weapons are, a human mind *can* lick one of theirs. Pete Goda proved that. But we don't know just how. I don't think Pete had what you'd call a 'strong' mind; he just had something to tie to. The best I can say about that is that every one of us better grab tight to whatever is his strongest hold on life, and don't let go!"

The words hammered even into Mrs. Jordan's numb mind. She looked at Harry Burk with desperate hope, with an upsurging of blind trust. His purposeful speech, his resolute bearing . . . surely somehow he'd rescue them.

The second hand still swept. Burk went on hurriedly, "I've made arrangements. One thing I learned from Pete that may be useful is the fact that after a human body is overcome by one of the alien minds, it's practically helpless for a while — until the Fisher's perfected its control, I suppose. So — if some of us don't come through, are possessed, they'll have to be made harmless by whoever does make it." He gestured to the table in the middle of the salon, where several lengths of stout cord lay coiled. "I've set signal rockets ready to fire. They ought to be launched two or three hours from now, when the ship will be crossing the southern travel lanes. If only one of us should escape, that one will have to attend to everything. Everybody got it?"

Mrs. Jordan saw the others nod, and she, herself, nodded vaguely.

"One of us, at least, *has* to win out. We don't want to be responsible for letting the Fishers loose on the human race again."

He paused, and in the silence Leoce Linforth's clear young voice rose. "Perhaps we shouldn't try. . . . There were some others who killed themselves, rather than do that."

Mrs. Jordan swiveled her head about again. The girl sounded terrifyingly as if she *meant* it. . . . Leoce was leaning forward, her slanted eyes fixed on Burk — eyes moist and luminous. Burk shook his head, smiling faintly. "I think you'd be voted down on that," he told Leoce. "Most of us here want to go on living."

"But if . . ."

Ilena Burk broke in crisply, "If this Pete Goda, who seems to have been rather an oaf, could fight off the Fishers, I don't see why we can't. We're all reasonably intelligent people. That ought to make a difference."

"Difference, sure," said Burk. "But which way?"

Charles Linforth burst out, his voice unnaturally shrill: "Can't you tell us anything more definite about what we're up against? How can we —"

"Shut up," said Burk flatly, without taking his eyes off his wife. "From what Pete told me, in the Dupays everybody meets his devils alone. Each of us has to make his separate fight. So — good luck, all."

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There was something in the ship.

It was a delicate odor, a perfume; perhaps no two of them sensed it alike, but to each it was an ecstasy of sweetness. Yet it couldn't be perfume. The ship was sealed, hurtling through empty space.

There was a smothered sound as someone tried to speak or cry out. But the perfume was overpowering, a poison sweeter than all poisons, that fumed up in the brain in a night-colored vapor of sleep.

V

Mrs. Jordan went down into the abyss screaming, crying, pleading for a little more time. She snatched at the weary flesh that was slipping away from her, and there was only the darkness; she grasped nothing but her fear, and hugged it passionately to her.

Her mind worked faster than it had for years. She knew suddenly that her fear was the only thing that could save her. The Fishers tried to deceive their victims, Harry had said. They couldn't fool her, because she was too much afraid of them.

The darkness lifted, and with it her immediate panic. Her eyes focused again, and she was sitting in her armchair, the lighted salon around her. Ilena sat facing her, pale and composed; Charles Linforth leaned beside the elevator shaft, and near him Harry stood facing them with his hands in his jacket pockets, his shoulders thrown back.

"We've still got a few minutes left," he said. "I'm going to go back over my ideas—"

In the darkness, grappling in a mental Cimmeria that had closed down again like a thunderclap. . . . The alarm had gone off in her blurred mind just in time for her to turn and face the thing that had come creeping up behind her while its shadow-show was before her eyes. Behind? It was everywhere, it was the darkness. But the fear had come back, too, and the fear fought for her.

The Fisher was gone.

She knew better than to believe that whispered suggestion. It was watching her through the darkness, searching her for another weak spot. At first it had responded to her panicky wish for a little more time. But that hadn't been good enough. It was probing more deeply, mercilessly. . . .

Through the blackness between her and her body, she could hear her own heart beating somewhere, slow, hesitant beats as if every one might be the last. . . . Then she realized that the heartbeats were really footfalls, slow, halting, and lastly that the footsteps were her own, it was she who was plodding through the dark. Why? To escape?

Another step — the blackness became gray half light, gray with hints of

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dull color like the iridescence of decay. Her feet still carried her forward. Mrs. Jordan realized that she was in a building with a vaulted ceiling borne by columns, a place with the air of a chapel built for some venerable religion. Guttering candles burned before dark niches along the shadowed walls, but black darkness lay in the alcoves and she could not see what was there.

As she walked among the columns, it seemed to her that from the corner of her eye she could see a darkness following her, flowing at her very heels and engulfing everything behind her. But when she turned, the columns, the sternly carved walls, were still there in the iridescent gray light.

Without volition, she paused before a niche. Something gleamed palely in its shadow; she bent and picked up the votive candle, held it so that its feeble light fell on the skeleton.

The thing stood there, planted on its feet, all its bones shining white and bare — the skull with its black eye sockets, the cage of the ribs, the dangling arms of naked bone, the ungainly pelvis . . . Mrs. Jordan stood holding the candle, staring; the skeleton did not exactly frighten her, but she felt an unreasoning, hateful disgust.

Something whispered to her to go on to the next niche.

Still holding the candle, she obeyed; and the wavering light fell on what stood in the shadow there.

Had this one been buried and dug up again, or had it never been buried at all? She couldn't tell, for the flesh and the tattered remnants of clothing were so far gone in putrefaction that if any earth clung to it it was indistinguishable. Her hand with the candle trembled, and the flame flickered, making obscene shadows in the corruption of its face. Its eyes and nose were gone, like those of the skull; its mouth was clenched shut, but lipless, and the teeth stood out hideously long from the dried and shrunken gums. Lank hair still clung to its head.

She stared fascinated, enveloped in the horror of it and its stench. She thought, then, that she glimpsed a flicker of life in the sunken eye sockets; but the movement was that of a mass of white worms.

The darkness touched her on the shoulder.

She moved, quivering, to the third alcove. The candle dripped hot wax upon her hand and she felt nothing.

Here was no rotting horror, only the logical third of the series — the pale rigid figure of one newly dead, a bloodless wax-like face from which open eyes stared, filmed in sightlessness. Yet it was death; she had seen the series in reverse, and before this one lay the stinking decay, the worms, at last the white, unhuman perfection of naked bone. . . . Now it was that she screamed, the candle slipped from her hand and went out. The darkness rushed in to cover what she had seen.

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The last figure had been herself. And the others . . . ?

Mrs. Jordan did her best to remember that none of this was real. The Fisher was near her in the darkness, waiting, like a patient beast. It had found her fear in her mind, and it was using what it had learned.

But the light was returning. Not the evil gray light of the shadowed chapel, but a light that was golden, warming and rich as wine. A light, an air such as she had not known since — since —.

She stood under a stone arch, looking out across a rolling meadow. The morning sun sparkled on dew, and the woods beyond were deep and musical with bird calls.

There was a chill in the shadow beneath the arch, and she knew that if she turned she would see the gray corridor with its columns and its niches of blasphemy. She shivered, knowing she could never bear to go back that way.

She walked out into the open, onto the meadow. As she walked, she became aware that she was barefoot, walking unshod in the dew-wet grass. She was light, her steps were effortless and turned easily into hops and skips.

It was good to be very light and small, and to feel like dancing. She had forgotten how it was . . . where had she forgotten? In a bad dream, perhaps.

She had dreamed that she was sick and weary and that life was not before her. But she didn't want to remember that any more.

The woods were deep and mysterious, a place to explore. She ran lightly across the grass, toward their green inviting depths, not caring really now what she might find.

One is ours, brothers.

VI

Charles Linforth strove tensely to make his mind the coldly calculating instrument it was meant to be, to render his brain a fortress against invasion. He had to resist, for he had left so much undone — and he couldn't believe that any of the others would succeed in withstanding the Fishers; all of them were weak and foolish in one way or another.

But the inrush of darkness shook his control. He groped wildly, and his hand closed on something hard, smooth, and cool — the knob of a door. Spasmodically he wrenched it open.

Light spilled out, momentarily dazzling him. When he had stopped blinking he saw a long room where men, soberly garbed, grave of face, sat round a polished mahogany table.

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Linforth almost laughed. Who do you think you're fooling? he asked silently of the thing that he felt waiting behind him in the darkness. This isn't the Board Room of Jordan Enterprises, with the Directors in session, back on Mars. It's merely an illusion behind my eyes; I could wipe it out by refusing to believe in it.

He felt pleased with himself for having so easily penetrated the fraud.

Nevertheless, he didn't feel like turning and stepping back into the darkness where the thing lurked; the lighted room, illusion or no, was preferable. He closed the door firmly behind him.

The Directors rose and bowed respectfully to Linforth. Why, he thought amusedly, this gets better and better! In real life he wouldn't even be permitted to enter the room like this, uninvited.

"Welcome, Mr. Jordan," said the President of the Board, and the other members echoed the greeting in a murmur of voices.

Linforth stared at them. But there was no hint of a joke, no telltale flicker of derision in the deferential faces. They all thought he was Loran Jordan.

But Loran Jordan was dead . . . or was he?

In a place like this, Linforth reminded himself tenaciously, you had to be very careful to separate the real from the unreal, take nothing for granted. He must keep his wits about him. You had to be very careful, very cunning, to outwit Loran Jordan . . . No! To outwit the Fishers, he meant.

"Would you like to see the annual report, Mr. Jordan?" inquired the President.

"Give it to me," said Linforth snappishly. It would clear his mind, he felt sure, to look at hard figures, profit and loss. He was always at his best with figures. He took the proffered bundle of papers and sat down at the head of the table to study them.

But the report was confusing. It seemed to consist mostly of obituary notices, some of them bearing the name of Loran Jordan, others that of Charles Linforth.

Puzzled and angry, he shoved the papers fluttering to the carpeted floor, and stood up. "You're not fooling me!" he snarled, and turned toward the door, determined to fling it open.

"Just as you say, Mr. Jordan," said the President obsequiously. "Ahem . . ." He cleared his throat circumstantially, and just as Linforth's hand touched the doorknob, asked: "Mr. Jordan — would you care to see the traitor, Linforth?"

Linforth spun round as if hornet-stung. "*What was that?*"

"The impostor Linforth has been brought up from the dungeons. We understood that you wished him to view the — ah — ceremonies."

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"Oh, yes, the ceremonies," said Linforth vaguely, determined not to show ignorance. "When do they begin?"

"Whenever you desire, Mr. Jordan; we have been awaiting your arrival."

"Very well, then," said Linforth. "Let's get on with it." He knew he was taking chances — but he had to see what came next.

"This way to the elevator," said the President.

They got in the elevator and rode up, up, and up. The walls of the shaft were transparent, and Linforth saw that they were rising to the summit of a tower that rose tremendously, till the landscape of Mars was spread out like a map below, like a map of the British Empire in the old schoolbooks, all pinkish red. And still the elevator climbed. He remembered no such lofty tower atop the Jordan Building; it must have been one of the things that Linforth, he meant Jordan, had done without asking his advice. . . .

The elevator halted. They were on the dizzy top of the tower, a narrow space girdled by a parapet. Not far away, looking over the edge at the remote landscape below, stood a man with hands shackled behind him, who turned to face them as they trooped onto the roof.

The President of the Board boomed orotundly: "Behold the traitor Linforth!"

The fettered man stood watching them impassively. He had the slight figure, the gray, deceptively unassuming features of Loran Jordan.

Linforth whispered to the President, almost in a panic, "Watch out. You've got to watch him closely. He's very resourceful."

"Don't worry," said the President aloud. "The chains are the best steel. The traitor will not escape!"

Linforth — the real one, as he kept reminding himself he was — took a deep breath. "Is everything ready?" he asked nervously.

The President made a sweeping gesture at the panorama around them. "Behold!" From the tower's height you could see all over Mars, see the vast network of Jordan Enterprises — mines, mills, factories, smelters, transportation facilities — flung far and wide across the face of the planet. Even diminished by distance, it was an awe-inspiring, almost overwhelming spectacle.

Linforth looked out from the tower with a tightening of the throat, a thrill of ecstasy, knowing that all of it was his and his alone. . . .

"Here you are, sir," someone said, and hands placed an object before him — an old-fashioned exploder, a little contrivance with batteries and trailing wires.

Linforth bent and grasped the handle of the plunger. He glared triumphantly at the figure that seemed to be Loran Jordan.

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"Watch this!" he snapped, and pushed the handle.

Everywhere on Mars the buildings, the diggings, the tracks and terminals that belonged to the Jordan Company heaved skyward in an endless series of mighty explosions. Flames spurted, smoke billowed up to blanket the ravished red landscape. A tremor shuddered through the tower.

But Loran Jordan stood unmoved; fettered as he was, there was a hint of a lopsided smile on his face, an old and well-remembered trick of his.

"Well?" shrieked Linforth above the distant crackling of flames. "What do you think of that?"

"What of it?" said Jordan, with his lopsided smile. "If, as you say, you are really Loran Jordan, whereas I am the abominable traitor Charles Linforth — what should *I* care?"

Linforth quivered. He said thickly, "I'll make you care!" and rushed at the other, thrusting with both hands at the gray figure of memory, hated, adored. It toppled backward over the parapet.

He leaned after it, and saw it falling, twirling and growing tiny, down toward the bank of smoke that covered the land below. The smoke was rising now to meet it, and the falling body vanished; the smoke kept rising, toward the summit of the tower.

The Directors clapped their hands and cried in unison, "The traitor Linforth is dead! Well done, Mr. Jordan!"

Two are ours, brothers!

VII

The darkness closed over Leoce's head like water, and she sank down, down, out of light and life, strangely numb and uncaring. . . .

Then realization came like the shock of an icy bath, and she began instinctively fighting, clawing her way back. But in the blackness there was no up or down and it was like when she was a child and woke smothering from a nightmare of darkness to find that the waking was only a dream and the darkness was still that of enveloping nightmare. In the dream there was always someone with a knife, someone whose face she couldn't see —

In her terror she screamed in a child's voice, "*Mother!*"

Her mother appeared out of the night, white as if in a spotlight, pale as Leoce had seen her last in the moments before shipwreck. . . . Leoce remembered, and sobbed, "No, no, I don't want you, Mother, you're dead."

There was only the darkness and her own weeping, dwindling, fading as distance diminished it.

But now she was wholly aware, remembering. She whispered passionately, "But *I'm* alive. I don't want to die, not yet, it's not enough —"

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Hold tight to life. Harry had said it, in the last minutes. Harry! He was her hold, because she loved him, because he had kissed her —

His arms were around her, strong and reassuring against evil. Tears misted her eyes so that his face was indistinct. She cried, "I love you, Harry. Kiss me," and he bent to kiss her on the lips, but gently, as one kisses a child.

He said, "I love you too, Leoce. Greater love hath no man."

She pressed her face against his shoulder, and his hand caressed her shining hair, lightly, tenderly. "My darling, poor darling, can you be brave?"

"Yes," said Leoce. "I'm brave."

He said quietly, "We have to go. You know?"

"I know," answered Leoce in a barely audible voice.

Together they mounted a broad spiraling stair, in a twilight that floated between luminous walls. Harry held her hand in his, all the way, and she was not afraid until they reached a broad landing carpeted in red. Then suddenly fear flooded in on her again, and she snatched her hand away and drew back from him, gasping, "But you — you're not Harry. You're one of Them —"

"Look at me," he commanded in a deep, resonant voice.

She saw what she had not noticed before, that he wore a priestly robe, of purple with a silver cord at the waist. She couldn't see his face clearly, because it was shadowed by a hood.

The voice from the shadow was stern, unrelenting, inescapable.

"You promised. No one else can do it."

His hand closed on hers again, in a hurting grip. Leoce felt her knees like water, her whole body weak and will-less, and when he commanded, "Come!" she followed, knowing only that she must be brave.

They emerged into a lofty chamber draped with hangings of red velvet, red-carpeted, into which the daylight filtered through crimson panes. They had stepped out on an elevated dais, and before them loomed an altar that was one huge block of stone like garnet. Beyond it and below, a crowd of people huddled together, their faces looking up worshipful and afraid.

At sight of them, Leoce felt courage flow through her limbs again. Among them, she recognized her father, Ilena Burk, Mrs. Jordan, and other familiar faces, of people she knew at home or in school — and, on the outskirts of the throng, pale and remote, her mother. Now Leoce knew why she had had to come here. They were all fated, doomed to die, afraid; and only she could save them, she who alone had the courage. . . .

She noticed then that Harry Burk was there too, looking up at her standing on the dais, so the priest beside her was not Harry after all, but that no longer mattered. She stepped lithely up onto the stone altar and looked out across the red chamber that was like the inside of a heart, smiled fearlessly

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down at them all, slim, lovely, without blemish. She wore a single bright garment, the color of flame — or was she naked? — that didn't matter, either.

They gazed raptly at her. Harry's eyes gleamed with open admiration. Her father frowned worriedly, gnawing his underlip. Mrs. Jordan's fat foolish features reflected uncomprehending alarm. Only Ilena turned away, hiding her face in shame. . . . Behind them all, the white ghostly mother nodded solemn approval. Then Leoce knew, finally and certainly, that it was all right.

The purple priest moved nearer, and something glittered in his hand, a sharp knife bright as a mirror. He poised it to strike.

But Leoce snatched it from him and with both hands held it flashing aloft.

She cried to them, "You are all saved, I forgive you!" and swiftly, before she could be afraid, plunged the point into her heart.

The red chamber dimmed before her eyes, the faces swam away. She looked down, and with wild regret and wilder triumph saw the bright sacrificial blood bathing her hands, and knew that she was dying.

Good fishing, brothers. Three!

VIII

Harry Burk kept his head. He was blind, he conjectured, owing to some sort of induced paralysis of the optic nerve or the brain centers governing sight. He couldn't feel his body, his brain was receiving no messages at all from the outside, all the neural channels were blocked. Plainly, the Fishers began by isolating the prey.

He waited, poised for counterattack, in the lonely darkness, and presently he felt it moving near him, touching him with tenuous palps of sense, probing . . .

"Damn you!" he said soundlessly, in the language of thought only. "Come out where I can see you, you —"

Startlingly there was light, a dim uneasy light as of a dirty street light burning on a corner in some backwater of one of the old cities on Earth — He *was* standing on a street corner; vision and feeling were his again, he felt his weight resting on the pavement, smelled the smoky air, saw before him a figure slouching against the wall.

Burk eyed it with loathing. It seemed to be a small man who wore a threadbare coat with over-padded shoulders, and deeply pleated, unpressed trousers, who cringed and returned his gaze with a look of fawning impudence.

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"I know you," Burk rasped. "You're a Fisher!"

"If you say so," the creature smirked ingratiatingly. "I'm all kinds of things. What do you want? You want I should get you a girl? Or some joy-dust, maybe? Anything you say —"

"Go to hell!" snapped Burk.

But he was uneasy. The whole scene, unreal as it must be, was in one sense too cursedly real, it was too much a fragment lifted complete out of his own past. Years back he'd visited enough of such cities on Earth, as a vagrant wanderer between ships. He'd walked their grimy streets and smelled their air, savored their stagnation with the superior arrogance of a traveler from far free places, drunk and brawled and whored and gone out on the next ship. . . . He became aware that he was wearing, not the conservative expensive garments of the last years, but a torn leather jacket, a disreputable pair of dungarees, scuffed spaceman's boots.

To cover his mounting confusion he took a threatening step, fists clenched, toward the fawning apparition under the street light.

It cowered, hiding its face, pleaded, "Don't hit me, mister, please."

Burk laughed gustily, scornfully, with the release of tension. "No tricks," he warned. "Remember, I'm onto you."

"Anything you say," whimpered the Fisher. It peered slily at him. "But if I'm a Fisher, like you say . . . no, please, don't hit me! . . . that means I can give you anything. Just think — *anything*."

"Go to hell!" said Burk again, and turned on his heel and sauntered away, between the dark masses of buildings looming over the ill-lit street.

Even in illusion, it was good to walk once more like this, as a jaunty carefree sojourner in a strange city whose corners and dark alleys hinted of risks and adventurers, in the surroundings and mood of the past. . . . But he hadn't forgotten that the past was the past, and the future was different. They couldn't hypnotize him into forgetting that.

The voice at his elbow wheedled, "Mister, I can get you —"

He wheeled on it angrily. But as he did so the scene changed without a flicker.

It was still night — but a savage night such as Earth had never known. Night on Pluto, where it was always night, where the Sun was a remote gleam in the airless sky, and the icefields of frozen helium glittered dimly, unchanging and unchanged for a billion years in the timelessness of the cold.

He stood watching, as men and machinery labored around the ship. Machines had to be specially designed to work here in the vacuum and the temperatures at which lubricating oils would be solids tougher than steel and metals would flake into gray powder — and men had to be a special kind to venture here, to the outer rim of the System, the edge of the great

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dark in which the Sun and all its planets dwindled to littlest grains of dust. To the outpost planet, where indeed in terms of measured distance you had taken only the first faltering step outward, but in terms of the energy of escape you were already most of the way to far Centaurus. . . .

Most wonderful was the ship. It towered enormous, ready for take off, its burnished nose pointed outward toward the gulfs beyond. It was the vessel which would pierce those gulfs for the first time and bring Man, the daring ape, to the realization of his most audacious dream.

Harry Burk watched, and at last he sighed. His eyes smarted with the realization that this too was not real.

"But it can be," said an insinuating voice beside him.

He was back on the shadowy street, facing the shabby, rakish figure again.

"God *damn* you," said Burk.

"Easy, now," whined the Fisher placatingly. "I'll make you a proposition."

Burk growled, "It better be good."

"You want to get away, don't you? Get away alone? It won't be like you'd killed them."

Burk listened to the wheedling voice and caught his breath in abrupt excitement. It was true, he didn't know why he hadn't realized it sooner. If he came through the ordeal alive and sane, but his wife and his mother-in-law didn't — as almost certainly they wouldn't — they'd be legally dead, he'd be the heir.

He remembered the vision of the interstellar ship, and the palms of his hands grew moist. Why, when you thought of it, the whole setup — the meteor collision, the ship's crippled course into the Belt — might almost have been arranged by him purposely; but there could never be any suspicion of that. It was a terrific gamble, of course; but Harry Burk had never yet flinched from taking a chance.

"You can win," muttered the Fisher beside him. "Put it all on one throw. You can win everything."

Burk looked contemptuously sidelong at it, a reckless, fighting smile on his lips.

"That's right," he said. "One throw. And winner take all!"

They were kneeling in a pool of shadowless light, in the circumambient dark. Burk rattled the dice in his cupped hands, holding his breath. Blood hammered a tocsin in his ears. Dream or waking, it was all one — he'd never lived so fully before, the stakes had never been so high.

With a swift exhalation he cast the dice, watched them spin, flash, come to rest side by side with like faces staring uppermost.

With a rush the darkness seemed to draw in from all sides, till nothing was

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visible. Nothing in that black void at all — but the dice, and their meaning:

Snake eyes.

Brothers, the fourth is ours!

IX

Ilena braced herself and, rigid in the bodiless void, felt the coming of the Fisher, felt it grasp her in its foul embrace. Her whole being shrieked protest at the touch of that foulness, but she held herself from wincing or struggling, with all the force of her will.

It drew back. With a flash of grim triumph that she suppressed instantly and ruthlessly, she sensed that it was baffled by her passive inviolability, her refusal to strike out in any way that it could use against her.

She thought fiercely, "I am I, and nothing can change that!"

But what is "I"?

I am Ilena, I am the daughter of Loran Jordan, and I am going to be a mother, the mother of a son who will be called Loran. I am anchored in the past and in the future.

But what about the present?

The present is nothing, an illusion glimpsed and gone.

The present was Harry's kisses, his stormy lovemaking which in its moments threatened to rob her of that integral sense of self that she must keep unimpaired. The foul fiend watching, studying her knew that, and it used its fiendish craft to make her relive all those moments, in the blind furious tormented dark, shuddering, gasping, storm-tossed. . . . But she had weathered the storm, fought that battle before, and it could not destroy her so.

It slunk away once more, taking the memory of Harry with it, leaving her shivering, half-stunned, victorious.

I will bear a son, she thought bruisedly, and I will name him Loran.

A dream came upon her unbidden. She sat in a rocking chair, in a room dark with the stealing on of twilight, but a window before her looked out upon light, a bluish light that might have been dusk or dawn. Between her and the light a tall figure stood, looking pensively out the window, silhouetted dark against it; that was her son, grown tall as he must after many years, and the window was the future.

Ilena knew that she was an old woman. When she lifted her hand the movement was feeble, and the skin of her hand was like paper. She called out, a thin wordless cry, and the figure at the window turned, looking down at her.

"No, no!" Ilena gasped weakly. For the face of her son wore the features of Harry, strangely, blasphemously blended with traits of her father as she

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remembered him. She could not bear that he should have Harry's mocking eyes, the faint, reckless smile . . . That was monstrous, a violation not to be endured.

"No," she panted, "you're not the one . . ."

"Be quiet, rest," said her son assuredly. "Rest a while, and it will all be over, and everything will belong to me."

"*No!*" she shrilled, her voice cracking. "This isn't the future, it's only a dream, I won't stand for it!"

The dream wavered away. There was only chill darkness, and somewhere in its midst Ilena, hugging to herself her hard-won security.

But another vision formed, insidiously luring her into itself with a beckoning of warmth, the warmth of memory.

Her father, Loran Jordan, stood warming his hands before the great fireplace in the old house on Earth. He had come back from one of his trips to Mars, and he had been talking, as he sometimes did while Ilena's mother only seemed to listen, of his business, the complex web of wealth and power he was spinning out among the planets that Ilena had seen shining like stars in the sky at night. As always, when he talked like that, he seemed to grow; he became something more than a smallish man with graying temples — a giant, one of the great.

And Ilena was very young, pigtailed, unnoticed. She sat on the floor in one corner of the living room, playing with the boy doll that she had named Mr. Jordan.

She sat Mr. Jordan up against the wall and prodded him in the chest with her forefinger. "You better behave yourself," she told him. "Sit up straight, don't fidget, don't interrupt. You watch out, I'll tell your father when he comes home. And you better quit making people cry, and going away when I want you to stay. . . ."

A great shadow fell over her playing. Her father stood above her, gigantic; he said:

"Here, 'Lena baby, come over and sit by your mother. I don't see you very often. . . . And you might as well listen; you're never too young to learn, they say."

He picked up the doll Mr. Jordan and set him out of Ilena's reach, on the mantelpiece. "Come on, now."

She wanted to come and she didn't want, and between wanting and not-wanting she began to cry, but quietly, inside, so that her father wouldn't notice.

She might have cried, "No, I won't, I hate you!" But if she'd done that . . . maybe he would have killed her, maybe he would have gone away and never come back any more.

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Meekly she got up off the floor and followed her father.

"*No!*" screamed Ilena in the blackness. "It's a lie, it wasn't like that all —"

Her words fell without echo into the darkness; nothing was left there to give back an echo. Slowly, she realized that the enemy had gone away for good, and she was alone. Alone, herself, inviolable; past, present, and future were melted and gone, and she had won the fight. . . .

The darkness, impenetrable, enveloped her. In the darkness, Ilena, inalterable, Ilena who had only wanted to be left alone.

The fishing is indeed good, brothers. We have taken five.

But this time there must be no mistake. We must have them all, or it is fruitless; so much we have learned from failure.

Cast your nets once again, brothers. The sixth is yet to be taken.

X

Darkness was nothing strange. There had never been anything else, in all the time that had been.

But in this — there was something new, not to be accepted. Emptiness, the feel of space and cold, in place of cozy warmth and unfailing nourishment. . . .

It was very primitive. Mouth, nose, eyes, ears were as yet barest rudiments. Its brain was a blob of scarcely differentiated ectoderm, its limbs were undeveloped flukes. It had a tail. It still possessed (though it was shortly to lose) the gill arches of the primordial vertebrate.

No past, no experience, no memories save of its own slow growing, in its warm secret place, dark and fluid as the dark world of the abyssal fishes. It did not know that some day it would be born.

But it was life, already human life, and it meant to live. Unconditionally.

The stealthy approach of the intruder meant no life ever, meant return to the nothingness from which it was so recently come. . . .

So much it felt, though it knew nothing of death and nothing whatsoever of defeat. Knowing nothing, knowing only the law of the life unfolding within it, at the first touch of the thief it lashed back with a blind direct fury compared to which the vitality, the ferocity of the tiger or the killer shark would seem the timid hesitation of cowed and beaten things.

The Fishers drew away abashed. Their experience with the others, the complicated defeated minds that were willing, eager to accept delusion, had not prepared them for this.

Cautiously, the Fishers returned to the assault — and found no hold for their grappling, no flaw of regret or unattainable longing, only, confronting them like a wall, that monstrous formless will to live. Will inchoate, without

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knowledge of what it desired — unconditional, not to be cheated or cunningly denied.

In the darkness, the ghosts of life a billion years dead wrestled with the unborn — and failed. They left their mark on it, but not as they had wished. For, whereas in the normal course the first overt experience of any human life is an outrage and a defeat, the birth of a being who strenuously resents being born, pattern for all later defeats — here, now, was one whose first memory of conflict would be a memory of victory.

Back, brothers, back! This one has broken all our nets.
Who would have thought that among these —
But you know. If there are even a few such among them, it is unavailing; this race is one we shall never conquer. Release all of them, brothers, and return while there is time. We must die, and lie in wait again . . . for a million years, or a billion years, until our time shall come. . . .

XI

The derelict hurtled along its curve, leaving the Belt and its dwellers behind. Before long it would be time to fire the distress rockets; but for the present there was nothing to do.

For some time no one had said anything. Mostly they didn't look at each other either. It was as if the complex threads of communication, the relationships that had bound them all together in one pattern rather than any other, had snapped all at once, and it would be a long time, if ever, before a new pattern was established.

Harry Burk sought to break the silence. He said heavily, "I can't figure it. We all came through . . . but nobody seems to know why." His shoulders slumped. "I suppose we'll never know."

No one appeared to be listening.

Charles Linforth stood staring down dry-eyed at the shrouded body of his wife; his face was haggard and remote, as it had been ever since their awakening, and since he had announced his decision to resign from all connection with the Jordan Company — announced it as a decision taken some time earlier, upon due consideration, for reasons of health. . . . They could guess all they liked, that was all he would ever let them know, as far as he would ever let the mask slip.

Leoce sat apart, her slanted eyes sleepy and unseeing. At first she had wept bitterly, terribly, till they had feared she was insane, wept as for something lost and now never again to be found. Her father and Harry had been awkward and helpless in the face of the girl's hysteria; it had been the dark Ilena, who alone seemed unchanged, who had talked to her comfortingly,

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soothed her at last. Now Leoce was quiet and oddly intent. She was trying to conjure up the face of the hooded priest in her dream, trying to remember some glimpse, some clue. . . . She no longer glanced at Harry Burk.

Mrs. Jordan was not listening. She lay back in her big chair, her hands limp in her lap, her face placid, eyes closed. She no longer cared what might become of her golden yacht, her many possessions, all the wealth whose extent she'd never quite comprehended. She was no longer even afraid of dying; she was dead.

Burk got restlessly to his feet and nodded to his wife. Ilena rose like an automaton and followed him into the starboard gallery, away from the rest, where space looked in through the glass walls.

He stared hard at her smooth, unrevealing face, and had trouble finding the words. "You might as well know now —" he began, and stopped.

"Yes?" said Ilena, unhurried, waiting.

"We won't know, of course, till we find out the terms of the will. But it doesn't matter. I'll sign it all over, if necessary. I'm through." Harry Burk, small-time gambler, whose luck and whose nerve ran out when the stakes got so big he couldn't really see them. Not his kind of game, he knew now. He'd seen himself in the mirror — maybe they all had; about Ilena it was hard to tell. . . .

"I see," said Ilena. "Mother's dead, Mr. Linforth's resigned, now you're resigning. You're all going off and leaving me, aren't you?" Her voice was unemotional, factual. It was only natural that it should be so: that they should all go away in the end and leave her alone with the burden she had chosen.

"I'm not talking about leaving," said Burk roughly.

"No, of course. There's the child."

"Yes, the child. He'll be different!"

"He will be."

Just how different, they could have no idea.

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It was Little Buttercup, the most distinguished bumboat-woman in English literature, who, in a mood of oracular revealing, stated one of the basic principles of fantasy: Things are seldom what they seem. Skim milk, she informs us, masquerades as cream, and jackdaws strut in peacocks' feathers; and even stranger disguises have become commonplaces of science fiction, in which you may at any moment learn that a seeming Martian superman is really a Jovian android. But few of these masquerades have the quiet plausibility of that exposed by Mr. Webb — which may cause you a worried moment or two on your next visit to a Zoological Garden.

Special Talent

by CHARLES WEBB

WHEN THE LAST spectator had gone, Albert relaxed. His name was not really Albert; it was actually something quite indecipherable, and it had been handed down to him through many generations of patient waiting. But of this the humans were blissfully ignorant; three weeks after his arrival, one of the keepers, a devotee of a certain comic strip, had dubbed him "Albert," and "Albert" he remained. He really didn't mind — it seemed to strike a responsive chord in the visitors, and the keepers always used it affectionately.

Besides, he often mused, what's in a name? It was the good life that counted.

He lay happily in the warm slime for several minutes, then crawled out onto his favorite flat rock to catch the last rays of slanting sunshine. He was dozing peacefully as darkness fell across the zoo.

"*Pssst!*" A conspiratorial voice rasped in the night. "Brother!"

Albert cocked one eye open. Two beady eyes in a long, snouty, scaly head — a reasonable replica of his own — peered in through the bars. "Beat it," Albert said.

"Brother, I must *talk* to you!"

"Move on, buddy," Albert said flatly. "There's room in this zoo for one pool, one large flat rock, one reasonably healthy specimen of the genus alligator. Me."

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"You don't understand," the visitor said urgently. "I am the Courier from Home."

Albert looked skeptical. "Your grandfather's a lady's handbag," he said.

"But I *am!*" The stranger's voice rose, striking a harsh, plaintive note. "The password is 'Fogbound.' "

"Okay," Albert said grudgingly. His tone was resigned. "How are things at Home?"

"Wet," said the envoy. "Rain and fog — fog and rain — all the time." He coughed wheezingly. "You have no idea —"

"Shh!" Albert held up a warning claw. He arched his neck attentively, sorting out the various night sounds of the zoo. "Quickly," he said. "The keeper's coming — get in here!"

The visitor seemed reluctant to share the cage.

"Come on!" Albert rasped. All Special Talent people — by the very nature of their physical makeup — were entitled to a bit of waspishness now and then. He was tempted to use his quota.

The visitor hesitated another moment, then climbed the high fence of steel bars, using his short, clumsy legs with surprising agility.

"Into the pool," Albert said. "You've been eying it ever since you got here, anyway."

Gratefully, with almost sensuous abandon, the envoy slid into the dark water. A moment later the keeper hove into view, bearing the extra tidbit that was almost a nightly ritual.

"Chow down," he said in his pleasant soft voice, sliding open the feeding door.

Albert grunted soft acknowledgement.

"Good show today, Albert," the keeper said. "Kids loved it." He closed the gate and walked off into the night, whistling.

Albert lumbered over to the water. "Come out of there," he said, "before you start getting ideas about *whose* pool it is."

The visitor crawled out onto the flat rock. "Why, brother," he said aggrievedly, "what makes you think —?"

"Don't 'brother' me," Albert said. "*And get off my rock!*"

Hastily, the visitor clambered down beside him. "Listen," he said stiffly, "I'm the special envoy of the High Command. They won't like it if you don't accord me the respect due someone with diplomatic status —"

"Here," Albert said, dividing the food into two piles and giving the smaller to the visitor. "Eat and shut up."

The other fed hungrily. "How degrading," he said through a mouthful. "One of your Special Talents, in surroundings like these."

Albert snorted, finishing his meal and eying the visitor's share.

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Hastily, the envoy crammed the remainder in his mouth.

"Took you long enough to get here," Albert said.

The visitor gulped convulsively. "That can be explained! The Plan had to be revised —"

Albert chuckled. "That Jupiter jaunt, huh?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. We —"

"Froze your tails off, I'll bet," Albert chortled. "What happened to the rest of the Special Talent people?"

The visitor looked embarrassed.

"Destroyed?" Albert said incredulously.

"Well . . . *no*, not *destroyed*." The envoy's discomfort was acute. "They . . . uh . . . were — well . . . lost."

"*Lost?*" Clapping both claws to his snout, Albert exploded in laughter. He collapsed to the ground, his tail flopping weakly as the giggles convulsed his lengthy frame.

"A matter of orbits," the visitor said angrily. "And blast-off times. And then more ships were lost, looking for the ones that were lost originally, and —"

"Helluva mess," Albert chortled. "Lost ships all over the System."

"You may be sure," the visitor said stiffly, "that the miscreants responsible have been ferreted out and have paid for their crimes against the State —"

"Oh, I am, I am!" said Albert. Then, sobering: "*All* the Special Talent people lost, huh? Then we're the only ones left —"

"You of the Earth Advance Force are the last hope of the Empire," the envoy said. "Venus needs you this day."

"Well," said Albert laconically, "she can't have us. This day or any day."

"*What?*"

"We won't help you," Albert said flatly. "Matter of fact, we've decided to use our Talents to help repel you if you do attack. We like things here just as they are."

"Well, of *course* you do!" The visitor fairly danced in agitation. "That's the whole purpose of the Invasion! A new planet — no more fog — greater benefits for all! We'll *share* it, under the benevolence of the Greater Venusian Empire!"

"We'll share nothing," Albert said sourly. His dyspepsia was beginning to bother him. "This time the High Command's pulled a blooper. You shouldn't have left us alone so long. Generation after generation, just sitting around waiting for the Orders — after awhile the whole thing gets to be a sort of a joke."

"I know, I know," the visitor said hastily. "But that Jupiter Expedition!"

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His eyes rolled in his scaly head. "You have no idea what that *cost!* And then all those trials and Royal Investigations —"

"Well," said Albert, "you're too late. We've settled down — developed other interests. There's even been some intermarriage with the Earth 'gators. All we know about Home is what our fathers told us — we've been here so long we're part of the mythology."

The visitor's snout flew open in alarm. "Oh, my," he said. "You haven't —?"

Albert shook his head. "Some of the ancestors did, in the very beginning. Not since then, though. No need to."

The envoy sighed with relief.

"The point is," Albert said bluntly, "this planet's up to its ears in 'gators now. Let you guys in here, and what would *we* have? Same thing — taxes, wars, housing shortages — work like a man all day." He swayed his head from side to side. "No thanks, buddy."

"The nobles have even donated their personal fortunes," the envoy said pleadingly. "I myself am penniless."

Albert made little clucking noises of sympathy.

"You've *got* to help us!" the visitor said rashly. "It's your duty!"

"My duty is to my people," said Albert. "And the Earthmen."

"The Earth *Men?*"

"Yeah." Albert's grin was lopsided. "After awhile you grow kind of fond of them. They aren't too bright, but things have worked out nicely. We let 'em catch our criminals for hides, and once in awhile we toss 'em a half-breed who's got delusions of grandeur. The rest of us have the run of the swamps."

"Why, that's terrible!" The visitor took a backward step, aghast. "That's bestial! You *collaborate* with such vicious creatures?"

Albert chuckled. "Well," he said, "they don't realize it. But you should see the scramble when the 'gator-vine puts out the word that a zoo expedition is coming into the swamps." He waved an expansive claw at his surroundings. "Usually one of us purebreds gets the fat deals like this, though."

" 'Fat deal,' indeed!" Disgust was clearly written in the visitor's face. "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"Oh?" said Albert.

"Idleness has made you soft!" the envoy sneered. "You have become a lapdog for the Earthmen!"

Albert rose to his feet, moving forward slowly. "Stranger," he said, his voice cold and menacing, "you'd better scram."

The visitor took a hasty backward step, and another, then wheeled and broke for the fence. Safe on the other side, he glared at Albert.

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"You've got six hours to get off the planet," Albert said sternly, like a judge pronouncing sentence. "I speak for all of us: don't show your ugly snout around here again."

"But —" The visitor hesitated, reading his defeat in Albert's implacable eyes. "I'll go, all right!" he burst out at last. "But wait'll I tell them at Home! Wait'll I tell them the descendants of the Advance Force are governed by a traitorous *jailbird!*"

Albert's anger dissolved in a plainly derisive chuckle.

"Laugh!" the visitor cried. "Go ahead! The fact remains — you have surrendered your sovereignty for scraps from the Earthmen's table! They are your . . . your *Masters!* And some day they'll find you out!"

Albert continued to chuckle. "Well, I'll tell you," he said. "You're forgetting our main bargaining point — *if* we ever need it." He stretched and strolled leisurely to his favorite flat rock. Unsheathing a hidden talon, he sliced off a shred of the rock and balanced it in a surprisingly dexterous front claw.

Tossing the rock high in the air with practised ease, Albert destroyed it with a sharp exhalation of flame and smoke. With another short blast he cleaned the talon and claw, then polished them against the soft folds of his neck.

Eyes wide with awe, the visitor had backed off to a safe distance. But Albert's final words stayed his flight briefly.

"Right now the Earthmen *think* they're our masters," Albert admitted musingly. He inspected his toilet with professional disinterest. "But they're sensible creatures. I'm sure they'd acknowledge a superior Talent if it were shown to them."

Don't Moon Around . . .

about **ROCKETING PRICES** this Christmas

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It is one of my articles of firmest belief that H. H. Munro, better known as Saki, never wrote a regrettable line; but anthologists keep reprinting a handful of unquestioned masterpieces (such as Tobermory *and* Sredni Vashtar*) and overlooking the wealth of less familiar Saki stories.* The Seventh Pullet, *which has, to my knowledge, never been reprinted outside of complete Saki collections, offers a fascinating parallel and contrast to the endlessly (if justly) anthologized* The Open Window. The Open Window *seems to be a pure supernatural fantasy and turns out to be fiction's most delightful leg-pull.* The Seventh Pullet . . . *but go on and discover for yourself the curious nature of this all but unknown story by the master of witty succinctness.*

The Seventh Pullet

by SAKI

"It's NOT THE DAILY grind that I complain of," said Blenkinthrope resentfully; "it's the dull grey sameness of my life outside of office hours. Nothing of interest comes my way, nothing remarkable or out of the common. Even the little things that I do try to find some interest in don't seem to interest other people. Things in my garden, for instance."

"The potato that weighed just over two pounds," said his friend Gorworth.

"Did I tell you about that?" said Blenkinthrope; "I was telling the others in the train this morning. I forgot if I'd told you."

"To be exact you told me that it weighed just under two pounds, but I took into account the fact that abnormal vegetables and fresh-water fish have an after-life, in which growth is not arrested."

"You're just like the others," said Blenkinthrope sadly, "you only make fun of it."

"The fault is with the potato, not with us," said Gorworth; "we are not in the least interested in it because it is not in the least interesting. The men you go up in the train with every day are just in the same case as yourself; their lives are commonplace and not very interesting to them-

From SHORT STORIES OF SAKI, (*H. H. Munro*); *copyright, 1930, by the Viking Press, Inc.*

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selves, and they certainly are not going to wax enthusiastic over the commonplace events in other men's lives. Tell them something startling, dramatic, piquant, that has happened to yourself or to some one in your family, and you will capture their interest at once. They will talk about you with a certain personal pride to all their acquaintances. 'Man I know intimately, fellow called Blenkinthrope, lives down my way, had two of his fingers clawed clean off by a lobster he was carrying home to supper. Doctor says entire hand may have to come off.' Now that is conversation of a very high order. But imagine walking into a tennis club with the remark: 'I know a man who has grown a potato weighing two and a quarter pounds.' "

"But hang it all, my dear fellow," said Blenkinthrope impatiently, "haven't I just told you that nothing remarkable ever happens to me?"

"Invent something," said Gorworth. Since winning a prize for excellence in scriptual knowledge at a preparatory school he had felt licensed to be a little more unscrupulous than the circle he moved in. Much might surely be excused to one who in early life could give a list of seventeen trees mentioned in the Old Testament.

"What sort of thing?" asked Blenkinthrope, somewhat snappishly.

"A snake got into your hen-run yesterday morning and killed six out of seven pullets, first mesmerizing them with its eyes and then biting them as they stood helpless. The seventh pullet was one of that French sort, with feathers all over its eyes, so it escaped the mesmeric snare, and just flew at what it could see of the snake and pecked it to pieces."

"Thank you," said Blenkinthrope stiffly; "it's a very clever invention. If such a thing had really happened in my poultry-run I admit I should have been proud and interested to tell people about it. But I'd rather stick to fact, even if it is plain fact." All the same his mind dwelt wistfully on the story of the Seventh Pullet. He could picture himself telling it in the train amid the absorbed interest of his fellow-passengers. Unconsciously all sorts of little details and improvements began to suggest themselves.

Wistfulness was still his dominant mood when he took his seat in the railway carriage the next morning. Opposite him sat Stevenham, who had attained to a recognized brevet of importance through the fact of an uncle having dropped dead in the act of voting at a Parliamentary election. That had happened three years ago, but Stevenham was still deferred to on all questions of home and foreign politics.

"Hullo, how's the giant mushroom, or whatever it was?" was all the notice Blenkinthrope got from his fellow travellers.

Young Duckby, whom he mildly disliked, speedily monopolized the general attention by an account of a domestic bereavement.

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"Had four young pigeons carried off last night by a whacking big rat. Oh, a monster he must have been; you could tell by the size of the hole he made breaking into the loft."

No moderate-sized rat ever seemed to carry out any predatory operations in these regions; they were all enormous in their enormity.

"Pretty hard lines that," continued Duckby, seeing that he had secured the attention and respect of the company; "four squeakers carried off at one swoop. You'd find it rather hard to match that in the way of unlooked-for bad luck."

"I had six pullets out of a pen of seven killed by a snake yesterday afternoon," said Blenkinthrope, in a voice which he hardly recognized as his own.

"By a snake?" came in excited chorus.

"It fascinated them with its deadly, glittering eyes, one after the other, and struck them down while they stood helpless. A bedridden neighbour, who wasn't able to call for assistance, witnessed it all from her bedroom window."

"Well, I never!" broke in the chorus, with variations.

"The interesting part of it is about the seventh pullet, the one that didn't get killed," resumed Blenkinthrope, slowly lighting a cigarette. His diffidence had left him, and he was beginning to realize how safe and easy depravity can seem once one has the courage to begin. "The six dead birds were Minorcas; the seventh was a Houdan with a mop of feathers all over its eyes. It could hardly see the snake at all, so of course it wasn't mesmerized like the others. It just could see something wriggling on the ground, and went for it and pecked it to death."

"Well, I'm blessed!" exclaimed the chorus.

In the course of the next few days Blenkinthrope discovered how little the loss of one's self-respect affects one when one has gained the esteem of the world. His story found its way into one of the poultry papers, and was copied thence into a daily news-sheet as a matter of general interest. A lady wrote from the North of Scotland recounting a similar episode which she had witnessed as occurring between a stoat and a blind grouse. Somehow a lie seems so much less reprehensible when one can call it a lee.

For a while the adapter of the Seventh Pullet story enjoyed to the full his altered standing as a person of consequence, one who had had some share in the strange events of his times. Then he was thrust once again into the cold grey background by the sudden blossoming into importance of Smith-Paddon, a daily fellow-traveller, whose little girl had been knocked down and nearly hurt by a car belonging to a musical-comedy actress. The actress was not in the car at the time, but she was in numerous photo-

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graphs which appeared in the illustrated papers of Zoto Dobreen inquiring after the well-being of Maisie, daughter of Edmund Smith-Paddon, Esq. With this new human interest to absorb them the travelling companions were almost rude when Blenkinthrope tried to explain his contrivance for keeping vipers and peregrine falcons out of his chicken-run.

Gorworth, to whom he unburdened himself in private, gave him the same counsel as theretofore.

"Invent something."

"Yes, but what?"

The ready affirmative coupled with the question betrayed a significant shifting of the ethical standpoint.

It was a few days later that Blenkinthrope revealed a chapter of family history to the customary gathering in the railway carriage.

"Curious thing happened to my aunt, the one who lives in Paris," he began. He had several aunts, but they were all geographically distributed over Greater London.

"She was sitting on a seat in the Bois the other afternoon, after lunching at the Roumanian Legation."

Whatever the story gained in picturesqueness for the dragging-in of diplomatic "atmosphere," it ceased from that moment to command any acceptance as a record of current events. Gorworth had warned his neophyte that this would be the case, but the traditional enthusiasm of the neophyte had triumphed over discretion.

"She was feeling rather drowsy, the effect probably of the champagne, which she's not in the habit of taking in the middle of the day."

A subdued murmur of admiration went round the company. Blenkinthrope's aunts were not used to taking champagne in the middle of the year, regarding it exclusively as a Christmas and New Year accessory.

"Presently a rather portly gentleman passed by her seat and paused an instant to light a cigar. At that moment a youngish man came up behind him, drew the blade from a swordstick, and stabbed him half a dozen times through and through. 'Scoundrel,' he cried to his victim, 'you do not know me. My name is Henri Leturc.' The elder man wiped away some of the blood that was spattering his clothes, turned to his assailant, and said: 'And since when has an attempted assassination been considered an introduction?' Then he finished lighting his cigar and walked away. My aunt had intended screaming for the police, but seeing the indifference with which the principal in the affair treated the matter she felt that it would be an impertinence on her part to interfere. Of course I need hardly say she put the whole thing down to the effects of a warm, drowsy afternoon and the Legation champagne. Now comes the astonishing part of my story. A fort-

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night later a bank manager was stabbed to death with a swordstick in that very part of the Bois. His assassin was the son of a charwoman formerly working at the bank, who had been dismissed from her job by the manager on account of chronic intemperance. His name was Henri Leturc."

From that moment Blenkinthrope was tacitly accepted as the Munchausen of the party. No effort was spared to draw him out from day to day in the exercise of testing their powers of credulity, and Blenkinthrope, in the false security of an assured and receptive audience, waxed industrious and ingenious in supplying the demand for marvels. Duckby's satirical story of a tame otter that had a tank in the garden to swim in, and whined restlessly whenever the water-rate was overdue, was scarcely an unfair parody of some of Blenkinthrope's wilder efforts. And then one day came Nemesis.

Returning to his villa one evening Blenkinthrope found his wife sitting in front of a pack of cards, which she was scrutinizing with unusual concentration.

"The same old patience-game?" he asked carelessly.

"No, dear; this is Death's Head patience, the most difficult of them all. I've never got it to work out, and somehow I should be rather frightened if I did. Mother only got it out once in her life; she was afraid of it, too. Her great-aunt had done it once and fallen dead from excitement the next moment, and mother always had a feeling that she would die if she ever got it out. She died the same night that she did it. She was in bad health at the time, certainly, but it was a strange coincidence."

"Don't do it if it frightens you," was Blenkinthrope's practical comment as he left the room. A few minutes later his wife called to him.

"John, it gave me such a turn, I nearly got it out. Only the five of diamonds held me up at the end. I really thought I'd done it."

"Why, you can do it," said Blenkinthrope, who had come back to the room; "if you shift the eight of clubs on to that open nine the five can be moved on to the six."

His wife made the suggested move with hasty, trembling fingers, and piled the outstanding cards on to their respective packs. Then she followed the example of her mother and great-grand-aunt.

Blenkinthrope had been genuinely fond of his wife, but in the midst of his bereavement one dominant thought obtruded itself. Something sensational and real had at last come into his life; no longer was it a grey, colourless record. The headlines which might appropriately describe his domestic tragedy kept shaping themselves in his brain. "Inherited presentiment comes true." "The Death's Head patience: Card-game that justified its sinister name in three generations." He wrote out a full story of the fatal occurrence for the *Essex Vedette*, the editor of which was a friend of

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his, and to another friend he gave a condensed account, to be taken up to the office of one of the halfpenny dailies. But in both cases his reputation as a romancer stood fatally in the way of the fulfilment of his ambitions. "Not the right thing to be Munchausening in a time of sorrow," agreed his friends among themselves, and a brief note of regret at the "sudden death of the wife of our respected neighbour, Mr. John Blenkinthrope, from heart failure," appearing in the news column of the local paper was the forlorn outcome of his visions of widespread publicity.

Blenkinthrope shrank from the society of his erstwhile travelling companions and took to travelling townwards by an earlier train. He sometimes tries to enlist the sympathy and attention of a chance acquaintance in details of the whistling prowess of his best canary or the dimensions of his largest beetroot; he scarcely recognizes himself as the man who was once spoken about and pointed out as the owner of the Seventh Pullet.

Coming Next Month

The long feature novelet in our next issue, on the stands in early December, will be J. T. McIntosh's *Selection*, a powerful story of a new problem in interstellar colonization which may remind you, in its convincing treatment of human problems, of the young Scot's famous *One in Three Hundred* series. This issue will also contain the first in a striking new series of science-fiction-detective stories written especially for F&SF by Isaac Asimov, the first appearance in any fantasy magazine of the distinguished British writer William Sansom, and two very special Christmas presents: the old-fashioned mid-winter ghost story at its modern and most ingenious best in John Dickson Carr's *Blind Man's Hood*, and a full-scale study of the wizardly creator of Oz, L. Frank Baum, by Martin Gardner — an article which will bring to life again all the Christmas trees under which you ever gleefully found an Oz book.

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Some ten years ago Edward Lee wrote an unusually good first mystery novel, A FISH FOR MURDER, *and (as is more unusual) followed it up with an even better second,* THE NEEDLE'S EYE — *both fine lively specimens of the hard-boiled-but-human detective story. Since then he has, unaccountably, done little writing but much ranch work and prospecting, and has settled down in Oregon as, he says, "the Old Man of the Mountain, log cabin, tame coons and all." Now from the log cabin comes this story, with all the warmth of Lee's novels plus a new sensitive gentleness — an offtrail story of Martian colonization which suggests, with rare plausibility, the nature of a wholly alien culture.*

Kalato

by EDWARD LEE

A BUG WHIRRED DOWN in the yellow lichens. At the end of its ecstatic little song an answer came from the rocky bluff above, where a strange sort of cottage protruded over the shoreline of this long-dead sea. Inspired anew by the response the bug gathered its energy and whirred again. And again it listened, but soon disappointment came to the bug and kept it silent.

His was a love song but even to his limited senses it became plain that the other was only a mechanical screech, devoid of romantic feeling.

A path ran precariously along the cliff to a narrow door, over which a flamboyant sign read MARSPORT NOVELTY CO. On the door itself was painted, in equally florid lettering, the name HENRY MARLIN, PROP. The door opened to a narrow room containing a workbench, shelves, several chairs of varying types, and a young woman.

She had yellow hair and blue eyes and an expression of relentless determination in one of the eyes. The other was blotted by a magnifier attached to an elastic band grooving the hair.

Her left hand held a blood-red stone. Her right brought to it a tiny abrasive wheel, her feet began to pump a pedal, and the air vibrated with that sound which had, if but for a moment, deceived a trusting bug.

Her name was Bessie Marlin, adopted daughter of Henry Marlin, Prop. Her profession, at which she was no apprentice, was the carving of intaglios and cameos and such from the semiprecious stones Henry dug in the tunnel

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behind her. The finished products were sold from a booth at the Marsport Station, almost ten miles to the east.

"But I would so like to understand," said the young person at the only opened window. He stood on a ledge that curved away to the west, connecting a series of openings in the cliff, the entrances to many abandoned mines. His voice was soft as the night winds that came with the rising of the two moons. And it was equally as persistent.

"I told you," Bessie said, not neglecting her work by so much as a glance. "They buy them for reminders. Souvenirs, we call them."

"But it is you who make them, and they never see you. Your father digs them, and they never see your father. They think these are stones of Mars, but how can they know? Of what could these things remind them?"

"We have nothing to do with it," Bessie snapped. "They want them because they are pretty, and because it proves they have been to Mars. They like to show them to other people who have never been here."

"Ah-h-h-h?"

Sharnol rocked on his elbows while his topaz eyes turned inward. The tips of his long thin fingers moved intricately, as if either set was the keyboard of a complex instrument. The finger tips danced against each other, tossing the thought between them in myriad contactual combinations. They finally came to rest.

"No-o-o-o," said Sharnol, "I am not able to understand."

"You Martians never understand anything," Bessie answered impatiently. "These things, these souvenirs, simply prove to other people that they have done something out of the ordinary that they are proud of."

"So-o-o-o? To go is to do? To move is to accomplish?"

"Oh, shut up!" Bessie rather liked young Sharnol, but he could be a confounded nuisance at times and she was already behind with her work. However, quickly regretting the unnecessary harshness, she now raised her head and pushed the glass from her eye.

"Why should you care about these things, Sharnol?"

His lambent gaze missed nothing. It darted, with febrility equal to that of his fingers, over her face. Then Sharnol smiled, which was a custom he had learned from the benevolent invaders of his planet. The corners of his narrow mouth soared high as his thin nostrils, yet showed no teeth. A single wrinkle in his leathery skin surrounded the smile, like a contour line. No warmth appeared in his eyes but Bessie knew that their cold intensity was not often a true reflection of his emotions. Their golden light varied only with their interest in the object before them.

"I must learn everything," Sharnol said simply. And the long fingers fluttered briefly, as if in agreement or applause.

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Bessie returned the smile, believing there could be no deception in it. When Sharnol smiled it meant invariably, she thought, what a smile should mean, and to ignore it would be equivalent to slapping a friendly child. She spoke with the indulgence one might show to such a child.

"I can't teach you everything, Sharnol. I don't know everything, and anyway I haven't the time. I must earn a living, you know."

"Ah-h-h-h?" From fingers to eyes to brain the concept was macerated and commingled with allied thoughts, and finally deposited in its proper storage space. Apparently it had not mingled well.

"You earn a living?" Sharnol asked. "But you were permitted to live. A gift, and now you must earn it?"

"Oh, go away, Sharnol. These are just clumsy Earth fingers. I can't use them and think at the same time. Yes, I must earn the right to live. I must make at least four of these things every day or stop eating. And don't you ask me why I eat. It's a custom I learned at home and Mars hasn't cured me of it."

"I eat," Sharnol said. He ruminated. "Every day," he then added, proudly.

"I know." Bessie tried to make her grimace a friendly one. "You're a sourdough."

"In just a box, it grows," Sharnol said. "It is always there, without being earned." The topaz eyes retreated in pursuit of the thought. The long fingers stirred, moved in a soundless pizzicato. For the first time they wandered to the most striking feature of his apparel — a very broad bandoleer studded throughout its length with crystal buttons. It was attached by a silver swivel to a silver collar tight upon his neck. From the collar argent filaments reached up to curl loosely about his small ears.

As his restless fingers moved upon the buttons the air about him filled with a murmur as of many distant insects.

Bessie listened, a half-smile parting her lips, wrinkles of tolerant amusement about and between her eyes.

"That was me," Sharnol said, "enjoying my — my dinner. I played the song of satisfied appetite and good digestion. It was the happiness of the innards."

"It did sound sort of pleased with itself," Bessie admitted. "You make a song of anything at all, don't you, Sharnol?"

"Anything. I am kalato. The — the bard. Actor, too."

"Troubadour, you mean?"

"I think so. If I understand. I play or sing of how I feel, or how you feel, or of how we would like to feel. Or sometimes of how we should never feel." His fingers played in the air. "These can hear, better than my ears. My ears are not so good as yours. And not so big, either."

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"Thank you, sir. I believe my feet are somewhat larger, too."

"Oh, much larger," Sharnol agreed, chivalrously. "Your whole body, I think —"

But further compliments were rudely interrupted.

"Bessie," inquired a voice of uncompromising harshness, "what in the name of all the planetary hells, especially Mars, is going on here? Can we make a living gossiping with every misbegotten tramp who crawls up out of the desert sands?"

Thus spake Henry Marlin, Prop., with an earthly glare that should have broken every fragile bone in Sharnol's attenuated form. Henry was short and burly and partly bald, each hair a grizzled combination of red and gray. His truculence was a mannerism practised for so many defensive years it had become by usage the most real of his characteristics.

His hostile gaze shifted from the Martian to the incomplete cameo in his daughter's hand, and then again to Sharnol. The visitor, the native, met both gaze and thought, and fingers like antennae hunted with increased tempo among the crystal beads. Henry's glare became one of exaggerated contempt.

"Never one honest day's work in his miserable life," he grumbled. "Back home I'd call him a fairy. Heaven knows what he would be called on this planet of degeneration."

"I am kalato," Sharnol muttered without looking up. His fingers played frantically.

"Just what I was saying. Kalato, pansy, no-good. Get moving. Start away from this house. Disappear, damn quick." He whirled about. "Bessie, I expect those stones to be finished by dinner, and I expect dinner to be on time. Isn't Barney coming tonight?"

"Yes. For dinner, I think."

"Another no-good. But at least he's a man. An Earthman. You, kalato — get moving, like I said."

Then Henry Marlin returned to his shaft and his pick and his dreary pursuit of colored stones. Sharnol, who had not moved, smiled over the window sill at Bessie. The cold intensity of his topaz eyes was unaltered and the girl, looking briefly into them, wondered at the obtuseness of her surviving foster parent. Sharnol was apparently weak by earthly standards but of all the male beings she had known he least deserved the charge of effeminacy.

"I am kalato," Sharnol said. "Listen."

From the studded bandoleer came a whimpering discordance of fear and frustration and malevolence. As counterpoint keened the unintelligent whine of a lost child greedily seeking what it could not understand or value.

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A bodiless voice cried out from some neurotic realm where it existed alone, always alone, always misunderstood. Bessie closed her ears with two palms.

"That is your father," Sharnol said. "I am still kalato. Listen."

Reluctantly she uncovered her ears, to a sighing melody from Earth, from home. A sunlit meadow sang, in the voices of larks and crickets and the low conversations of cows at rest. And again there was an accompaniment, a barely audible thing of beauty, of longing, of unchanging love for a world lost physically but never in memory.

"And that was you, Bessie."

She saw him dimly, through a film. "Yes," she whispered, "you are kalato. Truly." And after a moment she said, "How could you play so, of Earth, Sharnol? How could you know?"

"I played only what you know, and what you are. Why do you stay on Mars, Bessie?"

"Because I must."

"Because of the young man, Barney?"

"Yes. Partly, at least."

Sharnol's fingers felt the air, then the crystal studs. The result was softer than his other interpretations. But it was infinitely more disturbing in its vagueness, its hints of the almost but not quite — the almost abnormal, almost vicious, almost obscene in an obscurely horrible way.

"Oh, no!" Bessie moaned. "Who was that?"

"Never mind," Sharnol said. "I understand now, and I am no longer kalato, today. I think you had better work, Bessie."

"I guess I had." The tiny abrasive wheel buzzed, shrilled against the stone, and slipped screeching across its face. Bessie, startled, dropped the ruined object and began to cry.

Sharnol watched the weeping. His fingers moved slowly, pressing selected crystals. His narrow face was a saffron mask, without expression, but a glint of interest livened his eyes. It was a cold interest, yet his voice came warm and vibrant.

"Let me see it, Bessie."

She wiped a sleeve across her face, then bent and found the stone. Sharnol took it from her blindly extended hand. His sensitive fingers seemed to flow across it. He lifted the grinding wheel and felt of it too before he spoke.

"Give me a stone and make this sing, Bessie."

To the girl what followed was both incredible and humiliating. In a fraction of her best time he had finished a duplicate quite equal to her best work. She quietly handed him another blank and again he filled the adjacent air with crystalline powder while he brought into being a portrait which might have been copied from himself. Except that it was red.

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He put down the new cameo and the grinder, and smiled. "Now you have earned the right to live today, Bessie."

"Yes," she said absently, "that makes four."

"Bess — ieeeee!" came a roar from some inner depth.

Sharnol smiled and departed, with long graceful bounds, for the third tunnel where he and some compatriots just now were spending their daylight hours.

Deimos lit faintly the path where a young man trod with confidence. He had no need of the little moon to show him the way to Bessie Marlin. But his mind traveled, with no confidence at all, a well-worn path it hated but could not avoid. He could not, because he was never allowed to, imagine Bessie without the dour face of Henry Marlin spoiling the picture.

Barney snatched a kiss at the door and followed her into the workroom, now transformed by covers and flowered quilts into a passable imitation of a parlor. Henry was there, of course. His thick forearms framed the dishes he had emptied not long before. He greeted the guest with a gruff "Ha!"

Two moons faintly cross-shadowed the rugged terrain of the cliff face. Along it, a mere thickening of a natural fissure, beneath the west window of the Marlin shack, lay a living but unmoving figure. In a diagonal strip rows of small crystals winked feebly under the moons.

Within the shack a quarrel was building towards its usual climax. Two men loved a girl and each, in his own way, needed her. Her adoptive father could not carve his stones into salable form. He could not sell them uncarved. This left him economically helpless without her, a sad circumstance he mentioned from time to time. Almost from hour to hour, in fact. Bessie believed this to be true, which it was not. Henry's miserly fingers had secretly squirreled away enough money to keep him in his present style for the balance of his life. But Henry was not wholly satisfied with his present style.

The needs of Barney, a spare but vital and not unhandsome man still on the younger side of 30, were more elementary and more important. He did not crave just a girl; not just a wife. He yearned for Bessie and none other, in a way that sometimes smothered his breath and caused him to think of heart failures. Barney was very much in love.

But in his case also economics reared its ugly head. Having reached the top of his profession, which was spaceship mechanic, Barney felt correctly that the bulk of his potential talent was lying fallow. So he had pooled his resources and savings, resigned his job, and returned to school. As master mechanic he could marry. As student of the many intricacies involved in space navigation, he could not marry.

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And yet —

So the quarrel was renewed, with no slightest hope of a settlement since neither of the combatants ever touched on its hidden causes — because neither consciously knew of those causes.

It certainly did not matter greatly that Barney would be an impoverished student for several years. Had he been the richest man in the solar system Henry would promptly have found other objections.

For his part, Barney resented the apparent necessity for marrying the old buzzard along with his dutiful if adopted daughter.

And Bessie played peacemaker, to the best of her ability.

Outside, thin fingers came between the crystals and the moons, on the cliff face. They moved, now swiftly, now slowly, as kalato recorded, and interpreted, and transposed, in his need to understand everything.

At last Barney snatched another kiss at the door and tramped dispiritedly away. Henry Marlin went grumbling to his cot at the tunnel entrance. Bessie turned the parlor couch into a narrow bed. Sharnol leaped down to the prehistoric beach and bounded lightly across the lichens to a favorite spot, where he improvised upon the night's catch until satisfied that of it, at least, he did know everything. The twin moons hurtled on across the sky, over a silent planet.

Next morning Sharnol leaned through the open window, probing for information. "With Earth people," he inquired, "how many kinds of love are there?"

Bessie laughed. "My turn. How many with you Martians?"

"Two."

She waited, then asked, "Well, what are they, Sharnol?"

"Of race, of home."

"Not of self?"

"No."

"I can't believe that, Sharnol. When you are kalato, pride simply bursts from you. Isn't that self-love? Egotism, as we call it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Kalato is born so, and trained before he thinks. He is race — the voice of his people. I am proud that my race produces kalato."

"H'mmm," said his companion.

"But with you, Bessie? With your people?"

"Oh, many kinds. And even those are all mixed up, sometimes. Mostly, I'm afraid, love of self. And then there is love of race, of home town, of nation, of Earth — but these are really pride rather than love. But there is

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love for a mate, and the love of children for their parents, and the parents for their children —"

"Pride, Bessie?"

"It's mixed in, I guess. And then there is love for pets, and for power, and — well, others I can't think of. We seem to love most everything, don't we?"

"No. For you, only two. Listen, Bessie. I am kalato."

"Yes. I am listening. The voice of the people of Mars, and it says —"

To the mind it sang, rather than to the ears. More to the imagination than to the mind. More pictorially than audibly. More tenderly, more beautifully than any voice or music it bloomed in the awareness of its receptor. In the mind, in the imagination, in the soul it built an image too moving for tears or speech. Bessie Marlin stood unseeing beside her rough bench while kalato molded her emotions.

The meadow again, the larks and happy cows. The deepest, most enduring love of all — for home.

"Why do you stay on Mars, Bessie?"

"I don't know, Sharnol."

"Listen."

The larks, the crickets and the cows moved musically away while with murmuring ecstasy came a new love to overflow the foreground.

"Barney," Bessie whispered.

"Yes. Would it be home without Barney? Your two loves, Bessie. Can you be happy with one and not the other?"

"Stop it, Sharnol!"

"I am kalato."

"Stop it anyway. You are doing things to me. On purpose."

"Listen."

Still the enchanted meadow deliciously haunted by Barney, but borne on a cold wind blowing from some dark cavern filtered an aura of evil, a faintly hissing voice of selfish greed, of buried desires; buried from shameful necessity.

"It's a lie!" Bessie cried, but her face was pallid and her breathing fast.

Golden eyes flickered as kalato watched intently, measuring and studying. Having measured, their inner fire died away. "Now I am only Sharnol," he said, and smiled. "Let us work, Bessie. So you can live another day."

"What did that last mean?"

He shrugged his narrow shoulders. "I am only Sharnol," he repeated. "How could I know?"

She gave him a look, of doubt and partial comprehending, and of won-

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der. All these were in her voice when next she spoke. "I think kalato is magic," she said. "I am so happy, and so unhappy, and so upset — you do the work today, Sharnol. It's your fault."

"Of course, Bessie. An image of you?"

"No, of something Martian. Some new animal, maybe?"

"Ah-h-h-h? Yes, a bird. Watch, Bessie. A bird you have never seen. Nor I. Make the wheel go fast."

Bessie was enchanted with the bird, which an Earth scientist would have called archeopteryx until he had a closer look. At her insistence Sharnol made another bird and was starting on a third when harshly interrupted.

"You again?"

"Oh, Dad, look at what Sharnol is making for us! The tourists will go wild."

Henry Marlin glared at the Martian, then at the cameo. His glare disappeared. This might be a bird to the others, but to Henry it was money. He glanced uneasily at the new artisan.

"Ah — ah, kalato —"

"Sharnol."

"Maybe you and I can make a deal."

Sharnol smiled. He would probably have laughed if he had ever learned how. He shifted the bandoleer and from some recess behind it produced an amazing object. It was a jewel, many-faceted, soft rose in color. Or giving that general effect, for the color was a living thing. From a wine-red core or nucleus pulsing radiations reached the facets and broke there into an enveloping nimbus. It was a thing more strange to Earth eyes than even that incredible bird. It looked too hot to handle, but Sharnol held it carelessly. It was the size of a small walnut.

"Samoom," Sharnold said. "What you would call a blending of the sun and moons. There are three of these on Mars."

Henry Marlin mentioned deities in a hushed voice. He reached but withdrew his hand.

"Only three?"

Sharnol bent his head in assent. "They are the badge and power of kalato. Long ago it was settled that there should be three." He smiled. "Should I wear them in a necklace and be more kalato? No, it was decided. Three and no more."

Having put away the unique object he fingered crystal beads as he watched the suffused face of Henry Marlin.

"Does your power come from those, Sharnol?" Bessie wanted to know. "If you lost them would you stop being kalato?"

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"No, we would find three more."

"Where?" Henry burst forth, involuntarily.

Sharnol smiled. "Where these were found, surely. Not far from here. You would like to have one, Henry Marlin?"

"I would."

"We can make a deal. Come before the rising of the moons." And, still smiling, Sharnol bounded lightly down the trail to his own mine tunnel.

Henry came, between sunset and the rising of the moons. His long knife hung beneath an armpit inside his shirt. A revolver rested in the loose pocket of his miner's jacket. He came to make a deal.

It was black within the rocky tunnel — black as any hole in the ground at night. Except that three spots of incandescence marked where the samooms were supported invisibly some distance above the floor. Their pulsing glow picked out vaguely the head and shoulders of Sharnol, and the faces only of others in the background.

"Who are those?" Henry demanded suspiciously.

"Students of kalato," Sharnol said.

"Let us get to the point, then," said Henry, his eagerness making him unduly abrupt. "Everything I have for two of those."

"One," Sharnol corrected. "Tell me. You will sell it and buy things for yourself?"

"That I will."

"Then I could buy things with it?"

"Well — yes. Sure you could. But what would *you* do with Earth things?"

Kalato played of voluptuousness, of power come at last to an ego long starved for recognition. He incarnated nights of love and lust, and days of sybaritic ease. The song died suddenly.

"I will buy Bessie," Sharnol stated, and touched a row of crystals. Dim bodies moved, back in the tunnel's murk.

Henry Marlin heard and feared and relaxed, holding his homicidal rage until the shock had passed. He released his grasp on the revolver. There were too many uncertain targets. Many, no doubt, that he could not see at all. It was a trap. He recalled his gratuitous insults and, for the duration of this dangerous moment, regretted them.

"Two of the samooms for Bessie," Sharnol said. "Not three."

It was torture. Only the ripping away of psychic essences could make a decision possible. Henry temporized.

"Suppose Bessie refuses? I can't force her, you know."

"Send her here. Bessie will say."

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"And how about young Barney?"

"I will deal with Barney."

"When?"

"When he comes again."

"He's there right now." Henry thought shrewdly. There were ways. There were means. He spoke agreeably. "It's a deal. One of the stones to bind the bargain. The other when Bessie has decided."

Sharnol handed him a jewel. "The other," he said, "if the decision pleases me. Send her first, alone."

A soft light brightened the rocky chamber after Henry Marlin had gone. Sharnol went to a narrow box wherein a golden compound bubbled thickly. He ladled a portion of this onto a tray attached to the box, lowered a flat press over the tray, and leaned upon a lever. Liquid spurted from the tray back to the box. Then Sharnol removed the press, rolled up the sheet of solids remaining in the tray, and began his daily meal. Another stirred in a bowl of dried herbs for the hungry food-producing micro-organisms.

Bessie and Barney reluctantly drew apart when heavy footsteps on the cliff trail warned that their rare hour without chaperonage was over. There was a hint of fatality in that slow tread as it passed the west window, skirted the house on its lower side, and approached the only door.

Henry Marlin entered, took his chair at the table, and rested his pugnacious chin on solid miner's palms. He stared across the room, at neither of its occupants, at nothing. Muscular fingers dug spasmodically into his grizzled cheeks. At last he laid his revolver on the table and looked at Barney. Next he placed carefully before him a jewel, a glowing marvel, and looked at Bessie.

"The price of a man's soul," he said harshly, then laughed. It was a rasping sound, one that might have symbolized the tearing loose of that soul.

"I am not the first," Henry Marlin said. "Other men have sold out cheaper." He thought of this, somberly. "At least he had no horns," he said, and laughed again.

Barney looked apprehensively at Bessie, and at the revolver, and at what he considered a man gone suddenly mad. Bessie was pale yet calm as she watched a man whose sanity she did not doubt. Henry, she knew, had just come from kalato, and there was method and purpose in this seemingly wild incoherence.

Henry picked up the revolver and aimed it without immediate threat at Barney. But he spoke to his daughter.

"Barney will keep me company for awhile. Sharnol wants to see you, now. There is no danger."

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"By God —!" cried Barney, springing up and forward, but Bessie intervened.

"He is right," she said. "There is no danger from Sharnol. No threat from kalato. I will go."

"Bessie —"

"I tell you, I know. You'll wait here for me, Barney?"

"If you say so."

No word was spoken during the long minutes Bessie was away. She brought to Barney a look of timorous rapture, but for Henry Marlin no look at all. And it was to Barney that she said, "There was no danger. I have heard kalato, and at last I know. He is waiting for you now."

Again Barney caught the glance of shy rapture and, knowing Bessie as well as loving her, did not misunderstand. He nodded and departed.

He returned, and in his expression was no rapture. Instead he seemed bleak and withdrawn, wracked by emotion still too raw for assimilation.

"I have heard," he said. "You agree, Bessie?"

"Yes."

Barney took a hand from his pocket to display a second flashing gem. "For sale," he said grimly to Henry Marlin. "No soul wanted this time. Just money. All the money you have filched and hidden from Bessie's work. All your miser's fee. You are to give it to Bessie at once. That is the word of kalato."

"A bargain," said Henry Marlin, rising. He turned half to the tunnel and hesitated, seeing beyond the window pane a pair of cold topaz eyes. He tore loose his gaze and vanished down the corridor. When he reappeared he carried the metal box containing his entire, and partly illegitimate, wealth.

In the name of Bessie, Barney filled his pockets with the money. Bessie wrapped herself in garments suitable for a Martian night.

Barney said, putting the jewel on the table, "We are taking the dawn rocket for Earth, but we will be married first at the port. Any objections, Henry Marlin?"

"No objections. But — you mean Sharnol didn't want you, Bessie?"

Her silence was more scornful than any words.

Barney said, "If you have not left this house before the takeoff, Sharnol will come with the third jewel and close the bargain for good. Satisfied?"

"Well satisfied. It is a good bargain."

In the soft radiance at the end of a tunnel, not long before dawn, kalato addressed his three pupils. With thoughts that burned to them through space, with fingers that drew from the crystal beads living illustrations of the thoughts, he told of the invader, man.

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Man had weaknesses of the most unexpected sorts. His fears were manifold and generally without cause. He fled where none pursued. He taught himself obvious untruths and warped his life and thinking to fit his delusions. His love of self was the chiefest of these. Such love was but a mask to hide a self-loathing which at times broke through in violence, towards himself and others. Man was an incomplete and imperfect and wholly contemptible form of life.

But, said kalato, not all men. A few aspired, vainly, to even higher destinies than a Martian. There were other types, and yet others, and of each the leader spoke the sum of his accumulated knowledge.

And then he sent forth his followers, and went himself in the thin light of dawn to the cottage of Henry Marlin. He was standing by the closed window when the ground shuddered just before a flash and a roar announced that the rocket for Earth was on its way.

Henry, roused from his rapt contemplation of two incandescent eyes on the table cover, saw the Martian. He opened the window. Silently Sharnol handed him the third eye. Henry mumbled something as he took it back to the table.

Day passed, and the people from Earth in and about Marsport sealed their houses against the coming chill. In one of the more pretentious of these an engineer named John and his wife huddled beneath a single reading lamp. Secure in their love they sat contented in their isolation, safe from harm, barely aware of an exile which was to run another three Earth years. Reconciled long since to necessity, they confined nostalgia to the farthest depths of their minds.

Yet through barriers effective against cold and heat, Mars reached them intangibly. The chill that could not touch their bodies touched their minds. Their eyes slowly lifted from the printed pages. Invisibly about them were freezing sands and scorching rock, the almost lifeless desolation of a burned-out and discarded planet, valuable only for a few minerals and as a junction point to other and equally useless spheres. Men served their allotted times and left to make room for new men. Why? What use?

Depression settled upon the engineer and his wife, so deeply that each became aware of the other's feeling. Their eyes met.

"John?"

"Yes?"

"You know. I thought — but it seems so long, somehow."

"I'm signed up, honey. No use thinking of that, now."

"But I don't think I can stand it. Not for three more years. Couldn't you —?"

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"Damn it, no!"

After the tears they quarreled. After the quarrel their unshakable love brought reconciliation. But then, in their newly softened moods, nostalgia struck with redoubled force.

"Oh, John, please! We never quarreled at home. It's this awful place that does this to us. Couldn't we go right away? On doctor's orders, or something?"

"I'll see, honey. Maybe there is a way."

Wordlessly kalato, the voice of the people of Mars, creating nothing in any mind, nurtured fabulously the emotions already there. Without words kalato pleaded, "Stranger, go home. This is home only for Martians. Leave them to their strange laws and ways. Go to your own land, stranger, to your own people and customs. Go home."

Along the cliff a disheveled madman rushed, gun in hand. From cave to cave he ran, but found them empty. He circled about the dry sea bottom until worn out. At last he returned to his cottage.

Sharnol heard the explosion as he loped easily along the beach, toward his new rendezvous. He climbed to the Marsport Novelty Co. and peered through its west window.

He saw by the light of a lamp a bloodied head on the workbench, beside three worthless many-faceted bits of rose-quartz, from which the stored irradiation had become exhausted.

He saw a revolver on the floor, beneath a dead hand. Henry Marlin, too, had gone home.

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While the general reader will enjoy the following as a piece of extremely adroit fantasy, we must confess that, for once, our object is not entertainment, but instruction. Or, to be precise, that is the intent of Mr. Dickson. It is his hope that the writer *of fantasy will pay more than ordinary heed to this account of the problems inherent in the plausible telling of what we may term the* monster *story. As editors, we have, of late, noted an occasional unsureness of approach on the part of our contributors, to this tried-and-truest of fantasy themes. Perhaps Mr. Dickson's memorandum will explain why.*

A Case History

by GORDON R. DICKSON

"You look like an intelligent young man," said the gray-haired individual.

"Thank you," the bartender replied. "Another boilermaker?"

"Make it a double. My nerves are shattered."

"Ninety cents," the barman said, putting it down in front of him. "For long term results, however, I would recommend a psychiatrist."

"I am a psychiatrist," the other answered, gloomily.

"Oh."

"And there's no use telling me to see someone else in my own profession," he added. "I can't afford it. Anyway, it wouldn't help. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Or, in other words, who will listen to the psychiatrist? Nobody but the bartender."

"If you'll excuse me for a moment, the lunch crowd will be coming in shortly and I've got to get these glasses washed —"

"Young man," said the psychiatrist, "the patient's name was Elmer."

"Elmer?"

Elmer Grudy was his real name, said the psychiatrist. He is better known under his pseudonymn of Bruce Mondamin, as a leading writer of American fantasy fiction. His speciality was the supernatural spiced with a nice touch of the gruesome, for which certain childhood traumata were directly responsible — but I won't violate professional confidence by going into details. Enough that he was successful and had experienced an unhappy childhood — as who hasn't? Why, in my own case — but I wander from the subject.

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As I say, he was successful — up to a certain point. The monsters he was adept at creating in his fiction were uniformly successful in chilling the blood of readers during the early and relatively bleak years of his career when he lived on peanut butter sandwiches and cheap beer. However, with the postwar boom in this type of literature, he suddenly began to make money and the first signs of his personal tragedy began to make their appearance. He put on weight, filling out his six foot frame from a skinny 130 to a robust 180 pounds. He moved into better quarters, got a haircut and some new clothes and was observed to smile where he once scowled, to be mildly sociable where he used to be violently antisocial. In short, to give all the sinister indications of being happier than he had ever been in his life before.

I need hardly say that the effect all this had on his writing was disastrous. It was finally and forcibly brought to his attention when his latest story was returned by his most consistent publisher with a curt note, the substance of which was that he clean up a certain passage dealing with the story's Monster — or else —

Elmer looked at the passage indicated, in surprise. He had written it in good faith; and, even looking at it now, he could see nothing wrong with it. The passage went as follows:

"The Thing!" *screamed little Tommy Wittleton, "The Thing in the closet! It's coming out!"*

The Thing came all the way out. It advanced on little Tommy.

"There, there, Tommy," it said, "don't be frightened."

Beaming reassuringly on the little fellow, it produced a large chocolate bar from its pocket and gave it to the boy. Then it took its other hand from behind its back.

"Guess what I have here?" it whispered. Tommy looked. His eyes bugged out.

"The little puppy-dog I wanted for Christmas!" he cried joyfully.

Elmer scratched his head over the passage. It looked all right to him. He worried about it for a week and finally came to see me.

I pointed out the truth to him. He had, unfortunately, become a happy and contented man. It was ruining his work. What he needed was to delve back into his childhood and recapture the old neuroses and psychoses. After some struggle he agreed to try.

Now, Elmer had been raised by a maiden aunt following the early death of both his parents; and this maiden aunt — well, I'll spare you the details. However, the maiden aunt, who was still alive, was the personification of all his early terrors. She lived alone, a complete recluse, in a small town down

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east. Elmer had not seen her since he had run away from home at the age of fifteen to find freedom and the means of livelihood as general cleanup boy in a flourishing mortuary.

"Go back, Elmer," I told him. "Return in your own mind to the days when you lived with your Auntie Eglantine. Recreate your childhood, and your old skill with monsters will return to you."

Elmer was doubtful, but Elmer tried. He spent long hours walking by himself, or brooding in the cellar of his house (he had a house of his own by this time). He even tried eating sandwiches of stale bread and lard — a favorite of his aunt's during his childhood. But it seemed that he would be without success, until it occurred to him one day to put his unique talents to work on the problem. As a writer, he should be able to dramatize his situation with his pen. Accordingly, he sat down and commenced a story in which a boy like himself was being brought up by an aunt like his aunt; and at the end of the story, the aunt became a hideous monster.

The story was a resounding success. His monster aunt was the most spine-chilling thing to hit the stands and counters in a decade. There was one horrible little bit at the end in which her eyes melted and ran together — but I won't afflict you with the full description. Suffice it to say that the man who set up the galley proofs is now in Bellevue.

Well, the problem appeared solved. Elmer obliged with story after story in which somebody's aunt finished up by becoming a monster. And the aunt he used for his model was always his aunt; and in each story, her appearance became more horrible than ever.

I saw by the reviews in the various periodicals that Elmer was riding the crest of the wave; and I expected to hear no more from him. You can judge my surprise, therefore, when six months later the shattered wreck of a man that called himself Elmer Grudy tottered into my office and collapsed on the couch.

"What's this?" I said.

"Doctor," replied Elmer. "It's all up with me."

By slow degrees I extracted the story from him. Like so many artists he had committed the fatal error of living his own stories too intensely. And his mind was cracking. In a hoarse whisper he told me all.

"Say what you like, Doctor," he husked. "The conviction has been growing on me that my aunt is exactly what I have painted her to be — namely an inhuman monster in human guise. I have fought the notion, but it persists. Ordinary monsters are nothing to me. I used to take imaginary ones to bed with me as a child. But a monster who is at the same time a blood relative —" he shuddered and a look of pure terror came over his face. He clutched at my arm. "In my heart of hearts," he hissed, "I know

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the truth — that I am still living that story I have written so often. I am still her nephew, no matter under what fictional name I choose to hide myself. She is still my aunt and the close of the story is yet to be enacted. In the end I must return to her. And when I do —" his voice rose to a shriek — "she will turn out to be a monster more horrible than any I have ever described."

"A delusion," I assured him. "Born of overwork and your memories of your childhood."

"No, no," he sobbed. "It's true, I tell you. Even now, in that dark old house of hers, she is moving around inhumanly, a compound of all the forms I have given her in my writing."

Well, I worked with him, but the conviction was too firmly implanted to be removed by ordinary methods. Finally, I had to advance the ultimate suggestion.

"Elmer," I said, firmly, "you can conquer this obsession of yours only by facing up to it. There is only one way to do this. You must go down and see your aunt."

He collapsed, of course. I brought him around and repeated the suggestion. He collapsed again. However, after several repetitions of this, he finally faced the inevitable and made arrangements to go down to the small town where his aunt lived. It was the greatest mistake of my career.

The psychiatrist sighed.

"Wait a minute," the bartender said. "You aren't going to tell me that when he went down there, he found his aunt actually changed into some sort of horrible being that gobbled him up."

The psychiatrist bristled.

"Of course I'm not going to relate any such ridiculous nonsense!" he snapped. "Elmer had lived with monsters since he was a tiny child. I knew that. The most horrible monster conceivable could never be more than commonplace to such a man. In fact," he added, "it was just that that I was counting on."

The barman stared at him suspiciously.

"I don't believe I understand you," he said. "You mean you actually expected Elmer's aunt to be the monster his weird stories had made her out to be?"

"Naturally," snapped the doctor. "A layman, of course, would reject any such hypothesis on the grounds that it would be impossible. A scientific mind like mine recognises that nothing is impossible. I not only thought it probable that Elmer's aunt had become monstrous, I was sure of it. I had planned Elmer's discovery of this as a form of shock treatment."

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The early lunch crowd was beginning to drift in through the front door of the bar. The barman eyed them nervously.

"Then it didn't happen that way?" he asked, edging away.

"Of course it did! Elmer knocked on the door, was invited in, entered and found himself confronted by an inhuman *thing* which swayed toward him across the carpet and said — reproachfully — 'Elmer! You bad boy! Look what you've done to me!' Immediately, rationality returned to Elmer. He tipped his hat and politely replied, 'Sorry, Auntie,' then returned here to the city."

"I can't understand your being upset, then. He was cured, wasn't he?"

"Oh, he was cured all right," answered the psychiatrist, bitterly. "But I blasted his career in the process."

"I don't see why." Obviously puzzled, the barman stopped his slow retreat.

"I should think it would be obvious," said the psychiatrist, looking up in some surprise. "Elmer's monsters had, even in the beginning, been veiled aunt-images. His success had been founded upon successfully creating monsters out of aunts. Now that he had actually turned his aunt into a monster, the source of his raw material was lost to him. He could no longer write stories in which the aunt turned into a monster. Only one course remained open to him."

"You mean —" the bartender was not an unintelligent young man — "you mean that Elmer is now writing stories in which the monster turns into an aunt?"

"That's exactly what I mean," answered the psychiatrist, moodily. "What else could he do? And, quite naturally, in the process, he is slowly starving to death. I need hardly say," added the learned man, "that there is next to no market for that type of material."

GENIUS

A scientist living at Staines
Is searching with infinite pains
For a new type of sound
Which he hopes, when it's found,
Will travel much faster than planes.

R. J. P. HEWISON

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R. Bretnor knows a great deal about science fiction, both as a creator and as a critic; but this knowledge is as nothing compared to his encyclopedic comprehension of cats — as you may have gathered from such stories as Cat *(F&SF, April 1953) and* Genius of the Species *(in Raymond J. Healy's recent* 9 TALES OF SPACE AND TIME*). At present Mr. Bretnor and his wife are engaged in the first complete English translation of the earliest full-length book on cats in Western literature:* LES CHATS *(Paris, 1727), by the witty French scholar, swordsman and amorist Paradis de Moncrif (1687-1770). As firstfruit of that labor, F&SF is happy to bring you a charming tale of the esteem in which cats are held by the Gods themselves — which may be, as Moncrif asserts, "a quite authentic fragment from the history of the Gods of India," but more probably springs from the fancy of the Frenchman who, 200-odd years ago, appreciated cats as justly as Bretnor.*

The Cat, the Brahmin, and the Penitent

by FRANÇOIS AUGUSTIN PARADIS DE MONCRIF

(*translated by R. Bretnor*)

A KING OF THE INDIES named Salamgam had at his Court a Brahmin and a Penitent, both celebrated for the excellence of their virtue; from this, there arose between them a rivalry and a dissension which resulted in many marvelous happenings.

One day, as these illustrious Champions disputed before the King over the degree of virtue by which each claimed to excel the other, the Brahmin, incensed at seeing the Penitent sharing with him the Court's esteem, declared loudly that his own virtue was so acceptable before the God Parabaravarastu (who in India is King of the First Order of Divinities) that he could instantly and at his pleasure transport himself into any of the seven Heavens to which the Indians aspire. The Penitent took the Brahmin at his word; and the King, whom they had chosen as judge of

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their dispute, enjoined him to proceed to the Heaven of Devendiren and bring back from it a flower of the tree called Parisadam, the mere odor of which conveys immortality. The Brahmin saluted the King profoundly, soared upward, and disappeared like a flash: the Court waited in astonishment; but they did not doubt, meanwhile, that he had lost the wager. The Heaven of Devendiren had never been accessible to mortals. It is the abode of 48,000,000 Goddesses, who have for husbands 124,000,000 Gods, of whom Devendiren is Sovereign; and the flower Parisadam, of which he is extremely jealous, is his Heaven's principal delight.

The Penitent took great care to make much of all these difficulties, and congratulated himself in advance on the coming disgrace of his rival, until all at once the Brahmin reappeared with the celestial flower which he could have picked nowhere but in the gardens of the God Devendiren. The King and all the Court fell down in admiration at his knees; and everyone exalted his virtue to the supreme degree. Only the Penitent refused to join in this homage. "King," said he, "and you, oh Court too easy to beguile, you regard the entry of this Brahmin into the Heaven of Devendiren as a great marvel! It is nothing but the product of a common virtue; know that I send my Cat there whenever it seems good to me, and that Devendiren receives him with all sorts of kindnesses and distinctions." He spoke; and, without awaiting a reply, he made his Cat appear, whom he called Patripatan. He whispers a word in his ear — and see! it is the Cat who soars, and who, before the eyes of this enraptured Court, rises to lose himself among the clouds; he pierces through into the Heaven of Devendiren, who takes him in his arms, and gives him a thousand caresses.

To that point, the Penitent's project went wonderfully; but the favorite Goddess of Devendiren was struck, as though by lightning, with so urgent a fancy for the amiable Patripatan that she determined absolutely to retain him.

Devendiren, to whom the Cat had at the outset communicated the subject of his embassy, opposed this. He argued that Patripatan was awaited with impatience at the Court of King Salamgam; that he had left it risking the reputation of a Penitent; that the greatest injury which one could do to any man was to deprive him of his Cat. The Goddess would listen to none of it; all that Devendiren could obtain was her promise that she would keep Patripatan for only two or three centuries, after which she would faithfully send him back to the Court which awaited him. Salamgam, while this was going on, worried that the Cat might never return; the Penitent alone preserved an assured mien: in short, they waited the entire three centuries, with no ill effect other than impatience; for the Penitent, by the power of his virtue, kept them from aging. This time having passed,

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all at once they saw the sky wax glorious, and from a cloud of a thousand colors emerge a throne fashioned of various flowers from the Heaven of Devendiren. The Cat was set majestically upon this throne; and, having arrived before the King, he offered him with his charming paw an entire branch of the tree which bears the flower of Parisadam.

All the Court proclaimed the victory; the Penitent was universally felicitated; but the Brahmin, in his turn, now ventured to dispute the triumph with him. He argued that the virtue of the Penitent had not worked this great success alone; that everyone knew of the decided liking which Devendiren and his favorite Goddess had for Cats, and that without doubt Patripatan, in this marvelous adventure, had at least half the glory. The King, struck by this judicious reflection, did not venture to decide between the Penitent and the Brahmin; but all opinions were again united in admiration for Patripatan, and after this event that illustrious Cat was the joy of the Court, and supped each evening seated upon the shoulder of the Monarch.

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233)
SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION
of The Magazine of *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, published monthly at Concord, New Hampshire, for October 1st, 1954.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: *Publisher*, Joseph W. Ferman, 471 Park Avenue, New York 22, N. Y.; *Editor*, Anthony Boucher, 2643 Dana Street, Berkeley 4, Calif.; *Managing Editor*, Robert P. Mills, 471 Park Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. 2. The owners are: Fantasy House, Inc., 471 Park Avenue, New York 22, N. Y.; Joseph W. Ferman, 471 Park Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. (Signed) Joseph W. Ferman, *Publisher*. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1954. [Seal] Howard K. Pruyn. (My commission expires March 30, 1955.)

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William Morrison is chiefly noted for unusually solid and sober science fiction; but there's a pleasingly wild streak of fantasy in his writings, too —as in this agreeable tale of the plight of a male Cinderella, which incidentally discloses to us the truth about St. George and some useful new discoveries concerning dragons.

The Ardent Soul

by WILLIAM MORRISON

THE STORY OF WHAT happened long ago, as it has come down to Ben and the rest of us, is far from accurate. In actual fact:

The dragon was losing the battle and he knew it. St. George was laying on with powerful strokes of his slashing sword, and at the same time destroying the dragon's morale with bold cries: "Ha, vile varlet, weigh that on thy false scales!"

False or not, the scales were already littering the ground, and the beast's formerly tough hide was being stripped of its defenses. Through the murky smoke that rolled out of his nostrils and drifted over the scene there came only an occasional spark, and that a weak one. The one thing that glittered brightly was the fear in the great creature's eyes.

The maiden who was to be the prize of battle sensed it and shouted, "He blenches, Sir George! He cowers before thy mighty arm!"

The dragon never paid attention to the remarks of the spectators, but the girl was right. "This guy is real rugged," he thought. His education might be inferior to that of both his opponent and the maiden, but he was not short on native shrewdness. "I better scram while the scrammin's good. Like they say, better a live coward than a dead dragon."

Suddenly he turned and flew for his life, one wounded wing drooping as it labored to raise his great weight.

With a wild yell of triumph, as well as of rage at the thought of his prey escaping, the valiant George spurred his steed in hot pursuit. But the dragon was rising steadily, if painfully. For a moment he lost altitude, then made a supreme effort and rose over the tops of a large clump of trees which bordered a wood. Barely skimming over a tall oak, he disappeared from George's sight.

"Let not the foul creature escape!" cried the fair maiden, in a slightly bloodthirsty mood.

The knight, unable to pursue through the air and finding the underbrush

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too close for his panting steed, dismounted and rushed forward on foot. But when he broke through on the other side of the wood, there was no sign of his enemy. Not a scorched leaf or blackened tree trunk gave evidence of the dragon's passage.

A peasant in a field nearby was poking at the ground with a hoe, in the manner of peasants. "Hold, friend churl," cried the knight. "Hast seen aught of a dragon?"

"Hah?"

"A dragon, low-born oaf that thou art, a dragon, sore wounded unto death. Hast seen him?"

The low-born oaf shook his head, and went on tilling the soil.

"The craven beast has crept off to die in the solitude that befits his slinking soul," muttered George, frowning darkly. "He has devoured his last fair maiden." He stood for a moment lost in thought, then, giving himself the benefit of whatever doubt there was, picked up a piece of flint and dug another notch into the hilt of his sword, which already resembled the edge of a cross-cut saw. After that he cut back through the wood, to the maiden he had left behind. He was well on the way to sainthood, but all the same it was only polite to ask how she was feeling.

Cinderella, thought Benjamin St. George Tinker, was lucky. Just when things looked darkest, she attracted the attention of a good fairy who came along to brighten up the picture. But nowadays you couldn't expect fairies to appear so opportunely — at least not good ones — and when you were in a tough spot, as he was, you had to fight your way out of it yourself.

What would his famous ancestor have done? Probably raised his sword and cut off a head or two. Not a promising course of action for Ben to imitate.

Ben was a Cinderella in pants. He lived with a stepfather and three stepbrothers, and an unpleasant crew they were. His mother had suffered from them for ten years before dying quietly in order to escape. Ben was too young to think any more highly of that method than of decapitation — he was only 28 — and too cowed to think of anything better or simpler. As a matter of fact, he had a job and supported himself, and all he had to do was pick himself up and say, "So long, fellows, I'm leaving." He didn't.

They had him where they wanted him. Physically, first. The old man, Carl Moreland, was a husky six foot two, and he had weighed more than 200 pounds even before he put on fat. He could have picked Ben up in one hand and tied him in a knot, and Ben was afraid that some day he would do exactly that. The three sons were built on the same model. Stan was something of a shrimp, being only six feet. But Earl, who was two inches

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taller than his father and had an even uglier disposition, was a terrifying guy to have around. Of them all, only Harry, who drank like a fish, had what might be called a genial personality. But he wasn't genial to Ben, who over the course of the years had been pushed around by all of them.

Ben didn't have to mess around in the ashes of any fireplace — they didn't have a fireplace — but what dirty work there was he had to do. And he was not treated like a member of the family.

Take the evening that Earl brought his girl friend home to meet them. Barbara, to Ben, was something of a surprise. She was slim and not too tall, being a bit less than Ben's own height, and she was pretty. What was even more startling, she was friendly. She had a smile for everybody, even Ben.

Earl brought his brothers over and introduced them, and behind the brief words he had a manner which said, "Watch your step, boys, don't try to take her away from me. It ain't safe." But he didn't have to bother threatening Ben. He saved himself trouble by not introducing him.

Ben introduced himself. He knew that Earl wouldn't like it, but he made an effort of will, and though he couldn't quite get over his feeling of being scared, managed to do it. He came over and said shyly, "I'm Ben Tinker."

She smiled at him and shook hands. "Ben Tinker?" And she looked at him as if she knew the name and was wondering what he was doing in a family like this. Ben didn't know whether to be flattered or not.

"I'm Earl's stepbrother."

"Oh, yes. Earl mentioned you. He said you were supposed to be descended from the famous Saint George, on your mother's side."

"That's the story," admitted Ben.

"I don't see how," she said thoughtfully. "I thought that saints didn't leave descendants."

"I don't know," said Ben. "That's what Saint Thomas More thought when he was young — and he wound up with two wives and four children."

"Which half of his career would you like to imitate?" she asked.

That was a leading question if Ben had ever heard one, but it was as far as the conversation went. Before Ben could think of an answer, Earl was there, glowering at him. Earl said roughly, "What are you hangin' around for? Get back into the kitchen and make those sandwiches."

Leading questions forgotten, Ben got back to the sandwiches. All he had to remember her by were a few words and a smile. But they were pleasant words, and a warm smile.

He wasn't angry at Earl, and he didn't even think of striking back. He had long ago learned that it didn't pay to get angry at the three brothers,

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that it was much better to pretend you liked whatever they did to you. Oh, yes, perhaps deep down inside there might be plenty of anger, but there was no outlet for it. Not with them. If you had to be angry at all, it had better be with less frightening people.

That waiter, for instance, at lunch the next day. Maybe it wasn't his fault, but the French fried potatoes he brought Ben with his order were cold and soggy. Ben usually ate what was set before him, without complaints, but after the way Earl had acted to him the night before, these potatoes were too much. He said mildly, "These French fries are kind of lukewarm."

Ordinarily the waiter would have replaced them. But right now he wasn't in a good mood either, and he said, "You want 'em colder, huh? I'll bring you some ice cubes on the side."

"No ice cubes, and no wise cracks," said Ben, growing a little hot under the collar. "I want potatoes that are fit to eat."

"There's nothin' wrong with them potatoes," said the waiter. "Look, Bud, don't be one of them guys what's always complainin'."

"I'm not," replied Ben indignantly. "This is the first time I ever complained to a waiter."

"And you see what good it's doin' you. Let this be a lesson to you."

At this piece of insolence, Ben felt that he was close to the boiling point. It was bad enough to be insulted by his stepbrothers. He wouldn't take it from this man. His face grew hot, his throat dry, and even his blood seemed to be bubbling with anger. He started to reply, but rage choked off what he tried to say. All he could manage was a wordless burst of fury —

Two jets of flame swept from his nostrils and seared the table cloth. The waiter leaped back in sudden fright, and Ben could see his Adam's apple tremble as he gulped.

"Look, Mister," he said shakily, "don't get sore and set the place on fire. I didn't mean nothin' bad. Honest. I'll get you a new order of French fries."

Ben, who was doing his own share of gulping, put his hand on the table for support and just as hastily grabbed it away again. He had accidentally touched a fork, which seemed just a little below red heat.

"Don't bother," he said, almost as shakily as the waiter. "I think I warmed them up."

He had, and they tasted fine. He finished the meal in a dazed silence, and left the waiter a good tip.

When he walked out of the restaurant, he was still in a daze. What had happened — or, rather, *why* had it happened, *how* had it happened? Two jets of flame — why, you might think he was a circus performer, or a magician, or something. Was it possible — had that remote ancestor of his learned the trick from one of the dragons he slew? Was St. George a fire-

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breather himself, and therefore able to meet his scaly opponents on more or less equal terms?

He was crossing the street, still trying to decide this delicate question, when a big truck swept down on him. The truck driver, in the manner of some of his kind, amused himself by seeing how close he could come without actually hitting his target. A last minute application of the brakes, combined with a spasmodic leap for safety by Ben, produced a satisfyingly narrow escape.

The driver yelled, "Whatsa matter, jerk, ya blind?"

Jarred out of his thoughts, Ben shook his fist. "You big bum," he shouted. "You come down outta there and I'll knock your block off."

The truck driver came down. He was a man who overflowed his clothes, broad and surly-looking, for all the world like one of Ben's stepbrothers.

"Okay, Mac," he said. "If you're lookin' for a little vacation in the hospital, I'm the guy to give it to you."

The feeling of rage was sweeping through Ben again. This man had almost killed him, had followed the near-miss by insulting him, and was now threatening him. His face grew hot, his throat dry —

This time the flames offered a dazzling display of color: red, orange, violet, and green, brighter than any rainbow. The truck driver, his eyes popping, yelled, "Hey, be careful — I gotta truckload of kerosene!"

He ran back to the cabin of his truck. Ben sent another flame after him, but it was a weak effort this time, as his anger gave way to pride and wonder. "Saint George really *did* learn the trick," he thought. "And somehow I've inherited it. I'm no magician, but I can certainly make like one."

He spent the rest of that afternoon at work, thinking of his new-found ability. He was looking forward to the evening.

When he got home, Harry was already there. Harry was in his usual state of synthetically genial humor. And as usual, he tried to share his feelings. He waved a bottle. "Hiya, Ben," he said. "Have a drink."

"Not right now," said Ben politely.

"Don't talk back to me," growled Harry. "I said have a drink."

It was hard to feel angry at Harry. He didn't really mean any harm, thought Ben weakly. He just wanted somebody to drink with, and besides, he could be pretty nasty if you persisted in refusing him.

Ben had a drink. And after that he had another. And another.

Stan came into the room and said, "Hiya, sap. Feelin' rich?"

The drinks on an empty stomach had slowed Ben's wits. "Me?"

"Yeah, you. I got news for you."

Any news was bad news. Ben's heart sank. "You don't want me to sign another note?"

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Stan laughed. "You already signed your notes, chum. Look, when I lent that coupla hundred bucks from the old man, I promised to pay him back in three months. Well, the three months is up, and I can't pay."

"But he's your father."

"That don't cut no ice with him. You know how he is about dough. He wants what's comin' to him. And seein' as I ain't got it, you better hand it over."

It was a trick, thought Ben desperately, a dirty trick. Stan was a conniver, he had figured out a scheme to get the money from the despised stepbrother, and Ben had fallen for it. He had never realized, when he added his signature to that note, that the old man would actually demand the money. And from Ben, who had never got a cent of it.

He took a deep breath, and then exhaled slowly and purposefully in Stan's direction.

Nothing happened. No fire, not even smoke. Nothing except a look of disgust on Stan's face as he said, "I can smell that lousy scotch of Harry's on you. You oughta know better than to drink with him."

"At least Harry doesn't make me sign any notes."

"No dirty cracks. You better get that money ready."

"I don't have it."

"Lend it. Go to a finance company. They'll take it outa your wages."

Just a few minutes before, Ben had been feeling like a St. George ready to slay dragons. Now, like an unhorsed knight, he turned tail and retired from the scene of battle.

He returned to it an hour later. He hadn't had dinner, he reminded himself. He'd have to get dressed and go out. But he didn't feel like eating. He felt like crawling into some corner and binding up his wounds.

The phone rang. It was Ben's job to answer it, and he did so in dull and defeated tones. "Hello."

"Ben? This is Barbara."

He said in surprise, "You recognized my voice!"

"That wasn't so difficult. Earl and the others don't sound a bit like you."

He didn't know how to take that. She sounded as if she might be smiling at the other end of the phone, and he said, "I suppose you want to talk to Earl."

"I'm not anxious."

"You mean that you want to talk to me first?"

"That's the idea," she said. "Look, Ben, Earl asked me to go to the beach with him tomorrow, and I promised to let him know. How would you like to come along?"

"Me? No, thanks. Earl doesn't believe in a crowd. He wouldn't like it at all."

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"We could meet you there. Kind of accidentally. You know that place where the beach curves around?"

She was describing the section of beach in detail when Earl came into the room. He rumbled, "That for me?"

"I was just going to call you. Just a minute, Barbara, here's Earl now."

He held out the phone politely, and Earl took it without a word to him. Earl said into the phone, "Hiya, Toots." And then to Ben: "What do you have that funny look on your face for?"

That funny look was a rather pleased smirk, quite unsuitable for any descendant of St. George. "I can't help the way I look," said Ben, and retired quickly.

That evening he had a good dinner. The waiter was polite, and Ben didn't set fire to anything.

Later on he practiced deep breathing in front of a mirror, exhaling first slowly, then rapidly, with a kind of snort. No flames.

During the night he dreamed.

St. George, who didn't resemble Ben at all, had come across a dragon, a small one, who had been brought up on the other side of the railroad tracks. (Railroad tracks, as Ben was aware, hadn't been invented yet. But this didn't bother him.) St. George had drawn his sword threateningly, ready for a deadly onslaught. But the dragon said, in his semi-literate way, "Look, bud, I'm a peaceful guy. Waddya wanna make trouble for? I don't wanna fight nobody."

"Fight thou must, craven," replied the knight, "or else shalt thou die in utter scorn and contumely. 'Tis my mission to slay thy foul kind, and nought shall make me swerve from it by the breath of a hair, not thou nor thy friend the Fiend, nor all the flames of Hell."

"Okay, okay, take it easy. Talkin' about flames," said the dragon, "maybe we can make a deal. Listen, chum. How would *you* like to loin how to breathe fire? Then, when you come across one of those double-crossin' cousins of mine you can give the schmo a real surprise. Boy, will you knock him for a loop! How about it, bud?"

The knight's sword arm, which had been held aloft all this time, now lowered, and the knight himself said thoughtfully, "An it comport with the principles of true sportsmanship—"

"What's unsportin' about it?" demanded the small dragon. "They boin you, you boin them right back. You fight fire with fire. Only they got the build for it, so their flames are bigger."

"An the odds are still against me, then are the principles of true sportsmanship observed," said George, very noble and very English. "Instruct me, my foul friend, in the art of breathing flames."

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"And you won't rub me out after you loin how?"

"Thou hast my word, recreant poltroon," said the knight haughtily.

The dragon began to teach. "You open your mouth like this. Put your hand on my t'roat — easy, don't squeeze. Feel how the muscles move? Now, you take a deep breath, and you think, 'I'm boinin' up. . . .' "

Ben followed the details of instruction eagerly. Would he have a surprise for Earl that day! Then he saw to his horror that the figures of knight and dragon were blurring. He had to learn everything, every detail. He strained his eyes, but all he could see now was a sheet of flame, a vast sheet that blazed about him —

He awoke with a smothered yell. His bed was on fire, and he grabbed his pillow and began to beat out the flames. Five minutes later the fire was out. He noticed to his relief and surprise that by what might be considered a miracle he hadn't burned himself a bit.

The following day he was at the beach early, long before he was supposed to meet Barbara. As for Earl — well, unless he *could* breathe flames, better not think about him. Earl would be not very happy to find him there. Earl would probably play him some unpleasant trick. He didn't know what kind, but Earl had many unpleasant tricks, and over the years he had played them all on Ben and done his best to think of new ones. Whatever made Barbara decide to go out with a guy like that?

He was still wondering about it when she and Earl finally did arrive. They were already in bathing suits, Barbara filling hers, as much as there was of it, in a beautifully feminine way, and Earl swaggering down the beach in his shorts, showing his muscles and the mat of hair on his chest. His big stepbrother, Ben admitted to himself, was quite a sight. Six foot four, broad-shouldered, just as tough as he looked, he attracted the eyes of all the girls and knew it. For a while he was so busy showing off that he even neglected Barbara.

Three girls who were passing by stopped to stare in frank admiration. Earl, without looking at them, began to do handstands. The girls oohed and ahed, and Earl deigned to notice them. He let one of them stand with both feet on the palm of one of his hands, his face completely deadpan, as if this was so easy for him he didn't even know she was there. The girl revealed her presence to him by squealing happily.

It was while he was showing them some of his other tricks that Ben slipped down beside Barbara. "Hello," he said.

"Hello yourself. Sit down."

He remained standing. "Earl won't like this," he said. "I told you that before, and I'll say it again."

"I like it," she said. "Whom would you rather please, me or Earl?"

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"You," he admitted, and sat down, feeling like one of those ancient gladiators, the kind who were always announcing, "We who are about to die salute you."

"Thanks, Ben. I like you. You're different from the rest of the family."

"I'm not really part of it. And is that a reason for liking me?"

"It would be a reason for liking Dracula."

"I don't get it," he said. "I thought you admired Earl."

"What gave you that impression?"

"Why, you go out with him—"

"Earl is a handsome hunk of man. And I wanted to see whether he was just as handsome inside as out. It didn't take me long to find out that he isn't."

"But you made a date for today."

"Earl," she said, "is one of those men who won't take no for an answer. He insisted that I go out with him. And as I didn't want the afternoon to be an utter loss, I invited you to come along."

"I thought that was just an afterthought."

"Oh, no. I knew when I called that you would answer the phone first."

"You mean you'd rather go out with me?"

"The idea," she said demurely, "takes a long time to penetrate."

He took a deep breath. "I may be dumb," he said. "But when I get an idea, I don't lose it. You're not going out with Earl again."

"Not if you don't want me to."

"I don't want you to."

"Anything you say."

"You're going out with me," he announced.

"You're so masterful, Ben. But I don't mind."

"I have an idea," he said. "Earl is busy showing off to those girls. Why don't we pick ourselves up, go someplace, and forget about him?"

"Ben," she said, "are you afraid of Earl?"

"To be frank with you, yes."

"That's bad. Faint heart never won fair lady. Do you think I'm fair?"

"Much better than that. I don't deserve anybody like you, but I guess I've been afraid for so long, I can't change now. It began when I was a kid, and after a while it got to be a habit."

"Fear is a bad habit, courage a good one. Why can't you change?"

"I can't even cut out smoking!"

"Why should you? But this is different. You need the habit of not being afraid."

"If you can help me develop it—"

"All you have to do is make up your mind. All you have to do is decide you're not going to be afraid any more."

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If it were as easy as that. Ben grinned, rather wryly. "Done," he said. "I won't be afraid any more. Earl will want to kill me when he finds out you like me better than you do him, and maybe he'll try to do it, but I'm not going to run from him. I'm going to fight back. I'm going to tell him —"

A harsh voice said, "Hey, jerk, what you doing here?"

It was Earl. Ben felt his heart beat painfully, and involuntarily he shrank back. It was all right to talk big, but habit was habit, and the sight of a threatening Earl had the old effect.

Still, by an effort of will, you could hide the way you felt. By an extra strong effort, you could keep your shrinking from being seen. By an almost incredible effort, you could manage to say, "Talking to yourself, Earl?"

"Getting to be a wise guy, huh?" snarled Earl. A long arm reached down and grabbed Ben by the shoulder. "Stand up and look me in the eye and say that."

Ben didn't have to make much of an effort to stand. Earl's hand lifted him and kept him from falling again. Ben was conscious of his knees shaking, and at the same time, of Barbara watching. The slight glimpse of her that he had was reassuring. She was on his side. Earl might beat the daylights out of him, but Barbara would still be for him.

The beating wouldn't be pleasant, but he could take it. He wasn't, he realized, afraid any more. Not much, anyway. He had wasted enough time being afraid of Earl. He had let Earl and the rest of them ruin his life, but he wouldn't let them any more. They had never a civil word for him, never a decent act. They had pushed him around, robbed him, and treated him like a slave. And now, to add a final injury to all the other insults and injuries, Earl had drawn back his other arm, the one that wasn't busy holding Ben, and there was a cruel look on his face as if eager to enjoy the pain he knew he would inflict.

It was enough to burn a man up. And this time the flames came. Nice, big, hot flames.

They caught Earl smack in the chest, and he gave a howl of fright and anguish. The mat of hair caught fire, burning with as pretty a cloud of smoke as Ben had seen in a long time, and Earl threw himself down on the sand and rolled over and over to put the fire out. "Help!" he yelled. "Help! Water!"

A crowd was gathering. One man, his eyes on Earl, asked curiously, "What's wrong with him?"

"Too much hair on his chest," said Ben briefly. The man stared at Ben and shied away, a look of fright in his eyes. And then Ben and Barbara quietly departed.

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He knew how it was done now. It depended on the way you felt. How had he felt the first time it had happened? Angry at the waiter, but not afraid. And he had been angry also at the truck driver, too furious at the man's arrogance to worry about what would happen to himself. That time he had failed he had been more afraid than angry. Fear was a bad emotion, it kept him from getting results. Only when he had shaken it off was he able to produce the flames.

Barbara said, "I didn't know you could do parlor tricks."

"That wasn't a parlor trick. That was the saint in me."

"The saint? I knew from the beginning that you weren't a wolf. But you didn't look like a saint either."

"I don't care if I don't resemble old George. I'm satisfied to have his talents. A dragon taught him, you know, one of the dragons he spared. A matter of glands, I guess. When he had the right emotions, it did something to his bloodstream, and he shot out flames."

"And you think you've inherited his ability?" She seemed, to say the least, doubtful. "Can you do it any time you want to?"

"I think I can, now. Come home with me, Barbara, and I'll show you."

When they got home they found two worried stepbrothers and a surly stepfather. "What did you do to Earl?" demanded Stan. "I got a call from the hospital. He says you put him there."

"Never mind Earl. I have a few accounts to settle. Where's that note I owe the money on?"

"Here," said Stan. "And don't try to grab it, either."

"I won't lay a finger on it. How about having a drink with me, Harry?"

"Sure, jerk. A double scotch?"

They drank double scotches. The old man said, "What is this? I didn't know you liked to drink with Harry."

"I'm celebrating," said Ben. "Know something? I don't like you guys."

"You're drunk," said Harry.

"Not drunk. Mad. Sore as a boil. When I think back to all the nasty things you guys did to me, I could burn up."

"Scram. Go burn up someplace else."

"Right here will do," said Ben. And the flames shot out of his nostrils, a little paler than usual, because of the alcohol he had drunk, and set fire to the note.

Stan began to yell. The next moment it was Harry's turn, as his own alcoholic breath caught fire. And then the old man began to roar, as the sofa and the window curtains added to the illumination.

"*That* was an accident," said Ben. "I'd better turn in an alarm. Come on, Barbara."

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Outside the house, as the fire engines gathered, he wiped the perspiration from his forehead. Barbara looked at him curiously. "Where to next, my red-hot friend?" she asked.

"That's all," he said. "I'm quite cool now. Cool, and a bit scared."

"Scared? I thought you weren't going to be afraid of anything any more."

"Just of myself. When I think of what I can do, I get nervous."

"I'll try to be a calming influence," said Barbara.

"I need you. Look, Barbara, I haven't any home now. Maybe we can find a place together —"

"Why Benjamin Saint George Tinker!"

"I mean, we'll get married first."

"This *is* sudden. But seeing how much you need me, I'd better say, 'Yes'."

"I love you and I'll always be good to you. And I won't breathe any fire or smoke at you. Just don't get me angry."

"I'll try not to. I'm sensitive to fire. There are just a few things that worry me."

"What are they, dear?"

"I know that you're not going to turn really saintlike on me. But please don't go all dragon either."

"Go all dragon? Why, Barbara, how can I?"

"I don't know. I know only that out on the beach, as well as in the house just now, you weren't all human. That man you scared saw it too. Your skin was glittering and iridescent, as if covered with scales, and your fingers looked almost like claws and your shoulder blades like wings, and your face —"

His mouth opened in surprise, then closed. "But, Barbara," he protested, "I'm descended from Saint George, not the dragon!"

"Are you, dear? You know how these family stories get twisted. I'll bet one of your ancestors was ashamed of the truth and invented the Saint George story to cover up. But truth outed when I saw you turn into a part-dragon before my eyes."

Ben's mouth opened, and Barbara half expected flames to shoot out. But Ben's mood was not one of anger. He was thinking. Why, in that dream of mine, he reminded himself, no wonder St. George didn't look at all like me. It just goes to show that you have to be awfully careful how you interpret dreams. He said aloud, "Perhaps St. George *was* the kind of saint that didn't leave any offspring. And the dragon was kind of a man-dragon —"

"A weredragon would be the technical term," said Barbara.

"Whatever he was, he'd be a fearful beast one minute and maybe a peasant tilling the fields the next. Do you think I'm a descendant of his?"

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"He must have left dozens of descendants, although I suppose the dragon strain is pretty much thinned out by now. You know, Ben, I never did believe he demanded beautiful maidens just to devour them. It seemed like such a stupid waste of beautiful maidens. And I don't think the dragon was stupid."

"I hope I've inherited some of his good sense," said Ben. "I don't devour beautiful maidens either."

"Do you intend to have descendants too?"

"Dozens," said Ben. "Real fire-eaters. And I'll teach them to make it hot for anybody who bothers them."

"That'll be wonderful. One other thing, darling — will I have to wear fireproof lipstick?"

That turned out to be not at all necessary. There were no flames when he kissed her. A good thing, thought Ben, or the whole town would have been reduced to ashes that night.

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So sharply unexpected is the twist to the ending of this disturbing fantasy that we cannot discuss the story itself at any length for fear of hinting too broadly at its denouement. We can only say that it is a present-day variation of an ancient theme, all the more upsetting because of its very modernity.

Time and Place

by ROBERT SHERMAN TOWNES

Now, THIS VERY afternoon, I shall finally find out about the dream. One way or the other it will all be over. In a few minutes I come to the end of this Second Inaugural Address that some outer part of me is making for the crowds, the cameras and history. *It* must happen before then, or never at all. If *it* does happen, I am ready; I've been ready all my life. But suppose nothing happens? What then? For that I am not ready.

When did I first have the dream? I must have been very small; there were bars around the bed. I remember how the bars snapped out of sight and the wall with the capering pink and white bunnies seemed to ripple and vanish. As though I were looking through a narrow crack in a dark curtain, I saw there was a brightly lit scene. A fine blue sky, like this today. The great domed and pillared white building — there are many copies, but the singular assurance of this particular one is unmistakable. A platform, like this one, all draped with stars-and-stripes bunting. People, sitting very stiffly. An old man in a black nightie (as I called it then) holds a book for another man. The other man lays his left hand gently on the book and raises his right hand. I am the watcher and yet I am also the man touching the book. I know that.

Then, this grown-up "I" reads a speech. A big crowd listens carefully. Suddenly — a tiny popping sound from the edge of the crowd, and a lazy wisp of white smoke rising, a moment of taut silence as though the blue sky is about to burst in a scream. Then — a sliding nothingness, and I woke up — howling the house down.

People came running. Everybody wanted to know what was the matter wiv ums dear wittle babykins. But even then, as always later, when the dream kept coming back, I couldn't tell them. As though I put my own finger to my lips, I could never tell anyone about the dream.

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All through school, college and law training, it came back, never quite as clear and vivid as the first time, but always with the same details — these traditional details that surround me this afternoon at my second inaugural as President of the United States. I knew soon enough what the dream scene was, what it had to be. Only once every four years do they put up the platform in front of the huge domed and pillared building, and the old man in the black robe comes forward with the Bible.

Had I seen the picture in a book, perhaps, and been childishly awed by its unfailing solemnity? Possibly. But that final moment — the little popping sound, the lazy wisp of smoke at the edge of the crowd, the stifled cry of the people which the man on the platform does not live to hear erupt — could a tot still being read to at bedtime out of Uncle Wiggily books elaborate all that?

The dream has made a pattern of my life. A beginning any man has; I had a vision of the ending. As a young District Attorney, I used to see forms being filled out, "Time and place of death . . ." I alone could have filled out my own. I might have been happier without the pattern. The dream might have scared me into shunning politics, and I could have married and started another generation on its travels to wherever Time is going. But I never could: I always choked up at the thought. True, any man can die young; bridegrooms have died leaving the church; *but* they did not see it coming. That makes the difference. Perhaps my caution has been needless, my ethics too hard; but there was no precedent, that I knew of, and I had to work it out alone.

But I have been very lonely. I wish I could pencil that in on the history page — I was terribly lonely.

I had to push my interest hard when I took to the law; it was pure drudgery. My parents wondered at it, but they were proud that I was going to be a "professional man." Later, the clear, round beauty of the law came to me, but I can't take any special credit. All the time, I was chasing a dream, betting my life — and my death, too — on a long shot that might have been only a child's upset tummy. And all the while I hugged the secret joke that if I did win, I lost. Somehow, this seemed to make it fair for me to go on after the dream's peculiar prize.

When I went into politics, deliberately and with none of the dainty demurrers that so many educated men feel obliged to make when they want an office, I had about me an almost reckless assurance. That won people. It impressed the fat chaps with the cigar smoke smell, and it pleased the voters to whom the fat chaps offer candidates pretty much the way the Army offers meals — take it or leave it.

I think I was almost as good a D.A. as my election workers claim. A good

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judge and a good Governor. But now I wonder why I wasn't better. Even with my dream I was never more than workaday good — never a rocketing, outsize wonder for the nation. One thing, though, I never did become cynical, either. I was no Brandeis about the Law, but I handled it always with clean hands, and I kept the boys with sticky fingers from dipping into the public till.

Of course, if you mix with the fat chaps, some of the cigar smoke clings. But I always had my secret card. My dream was as clear as a newsreel picture, and as changelessly factual. I could afford not to compromise with the first slick operator that came along whispering "Governor's Mansion" or "White House." All along I knew. I always told myself I knew. Now on this fine blue afternoon am I so sure? What if it comes to nothing? One more page of the inaugural address left.

Speaking of the newsreels, I remember that odd little smile on my face when I saw the films of my inaugural as Governor. Not a very nice expression; smug, secretive, superior. I had let cynicism rise to the top. Some people probably figured then that I was going to be a front for the boodle boys. It was conceit; I was thinking how that ceremony was only a rehearsal.

Funny, though. I didn't smile at all when my backers at the Convention snake-danced for twenty howling minutes. I was scared then — for the first time. I knew how alone I was. Alone with destiny, or alone with a crackpot dream. Either way, I was apart forever from the yelling lads parading in the aisles. They liked me that way. A real dignified candidate.

My first inaugural was here, of course, on this very spot. The speech was a long one (people complained about it). Was I trying to bargain for a few more minutes of life? Was I offering, on the other hand, my unknown brother in destiny a longer chance at me? I don't know, even now. But I suspect that I knew somehow that nothing would happen — that time. Of course, I had fought like a Tatar to get Willy on the ticket as V.P. But also I accepted the nomination with open hands. There is a long-legged mouse in the Gobi desert that walks right up to the snake that eats it.

That first speech rolled to its end — no popping sound, no wisp of smoke. Only the hopeful applause that greets any inaugural, good or bad. They took the platform down; I went to watch them do it. The newspapers ran my picture and made no comment because for once they couldn't think of anything to say. Always among the staring cameras and the army of sensitive, perceptive reporters, I had this one last secret. I nodded appreciatively when they showed me the limousines that had armor plate under the sleek enamel. I was careful not to smile at the zeal of the Secret Service men who never left me alone. I don't really know why, but to smile would have been cheap. Yes, cheap.

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Sometimes, the day after I'd have the dream again would be intoxicating. Sadness, terror, assurance of more safe days ahead, and a quaint majesty of my person would all seem to come from this endlessly repeated copy of that first bright scene that replaced the pink and white bunnies long ago.

And sometimes, on a good spring morning perhaps, or near a beautiful woman, it would seem the cruelest joke. To feel the very substance of Time sliding through my fingers, when every other man enjoyed the immortality of ignorance. Then, I would try to push away the dream and make plans for my old age. I'd become a Senator, perhaps, and be wise and useful and live a long, long time. One night I would have the dream again, and the hurrying game would start all over again. Not one of the clever reporters here in Washington knows why my huge plan for harnessing the western water courses was sent to Congress with a hurriedly written message — not at all my usual plodding style — one certain morning last year.

I had my full term. No Lincoln, no Jefferson, but I gave the people the best I had. I could afford to be right *and* be President. I put good men in the best places and snubbed the party lads until they grew thin. They promised they'd remember me, and drew their fingers meaningfully across their throats. And, of course, come Convention time, they broke their legs trying to jump onto my bandwagon. I never started this bandwagon — it was either a juggernaut or a rocket into nowhere for me. I sat back and let things happen. (Is that passivity, maybe, the flaw in my career — the reason I never quite made top notch?)

Only twice in his lifetime — so says the Twenty-second Amendment — can a man stand on this platform and lay his left hand on the big book held by the old man in the black nightie. First time, I had a chance. Now, there is none. I have come to the answer time. Well, tot it up and it's not so bad. I gave the people the kind of government they deserve, but don't often do much about getting. I've gotten Willy in again as V.P.

Look at him sitting there self-consciously next to a hero general. He's looking at me oddly. There is concern and puzzlement on that honest, ugly face. I'd like to say good-bye. Perhaps a twitch of smile that he might remember in later years. I might even slip something ad lib into this speech we wrote together.

I might put in reams and reams of ad lib. I might talk forever. *I want to live!* I want to run and hide!

Now, even the newsreel men are looking at me quizzically. (The television men are fussing over their temporary power rig; they always are.) What is showing? Do they see panic? Is my voice stumbling over the prepared text or rushing too fast? My hands are moist, but steady as they turn the pages. Not pages. Page. There is no more. Now or never. The crowd is

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like a carpet before me. Each face is a simple design. How could anyone be afraid of them? Not them, *him*. Where are you? We are here together, we two, at so long last. I have kept my appointment. Where are you?

What is that sound? Thunder tearing the world. Only the hopeful applause of the crowd. The speech is over. It is *all* over. The second and last chance is past. Time and place will never meet again. The dream was a fraud. A nasty mean little joke. A baby ate too much before he was put to bed one night.

Look at Willy, all concern on that kind, honest face. That hateful face. All the hateful faces of a cheating, lying world. Well, I've four years of power ahead of me. I'll take pay in full for every lonely hour. I'll get back my own, and plenty more.

No. No. My eyes are wet. I never felt ashamed before. All that was spite. I can not stand being suddenly ordinary. And two minutes ago I was ready to scream for my life. Why am I standing here, still at the lectern as though I had more to say? They'll think I'm drunk, like poor old Andrew Johnson.

The Secret Service men close in; they think I am waiting for them. Well, I do need them now, for the strange, mysterious years ahead of me. The newsreel men are beginning to take down those beat-up old cameras. But the men around the sleek television cameras look angry and upset. Who is that black-haired young man they are pushing toward my aide?

Now, he is talking very earnestly to Charlie. Poor Charlie, not much of a job, being a President's aide — not if you're honest. Always having to say No. Charlie looks shocked by what the young man is asking; he shakes his head; the young man is persistent. And, apparently, persuasive. Charlie shrugs, and they are coming towards me.

Here is Charlie looking like an outraged priest. What ever can be the matter? He relays the young man's request. So, that is it. The ground is rolling; my stomach is cold. Something like terror is running through me, and with it, something like triumph.

Only two chances in a lifetime? Oh, not quite. It seems that the television cameras, unlike the newsreels, do not use their own electricity supply, and the temporary TV power rig broke down near the end of my speech. All over the country people got only a blank screen with pretty patterns. But the break is fixed now, Mr. President. And would I do just the last little part of my speech over again for the great television audience, please, Mr. President?

The young man — contact man, they call him — shows me just where to begin. The crowd, curious, has closed in again. I know the words by heart. I don't need to look at the page. I can look out over the crowd, to the very edge. . . .

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Recommended Reading

by THE EDITOR

THERE HASN'T been a Ray Bradbury book for over a year, and there's no prospect of one for another six months. (The author has been fully occupied in writing the screenplay of MOBY DICK for John Huston's production.) And yet Bradbury is, at the moment, the most newsworthy author of science-fantasy.

Within recent months Ray Bradbury has received the two most important literary prizes ever bestowed upon a writer in our field: from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, a $1,000 award for his contribution to American literature in THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES (Doubleday, $2.50; Bantam, 25c) and THE ILLUSTRATED MAN (Doubleday, $2.75; Bantam, 25c); and from the Commonwealth Club of California, its twenty-third annual gold medal for FAHRENHEIT 451 (Ballantine, $2.50; paper 35c), judged the best work of fiction produced in the state in 1953.

(The latter is, to be sure, a regional award . . . but what a region! The last two recipients were H. B. Davis and William Saroyan; this year's runners-up were Leon Uris and Ernest K. Gann. Agreeable sidelight: The corresponding Commonwealth Club medal for juvenile literature went this year to another F&SF author, Bill Brown, for his non-fantasy boys' book, ROARING RIVER.)

These distinctions mean, I think, that science-fantasy (I use the hybrid term because many critics, including me, feel that Bradbury has written little true science fiction) is moving more rapidly toward general literary acceptance than has any other specialized form of popular literature. No mystery writer, for instance, has received remotely comparable recognition for his crime writing (even though Nobel Prize winner William Faulkner writes strict formal detective stories as a side-line).

Ray Bradbury has not only achieved extraordinary (and justly earned) personal success in an incredibly short time; he has done more than any other single writer to persuade the literary pundits that imaginative literature of the future deserves serious critical consideration, and every science fiction writer, editor and reader owes him an unrepayable debt.

Even more astonishing is the developing influence of science-fantasy-via-Bradbury upon contemporary music. The British Broadcasting Corporation

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has presented a symphony based upon FAHRENHEIT 451; and the Twelfth World Science Fiction Convention offered, last September in San Francisco, the world premiere of a new chamber opera by the well-established young composer Charles Hamm, based upon the Bradbury short story *A Scent of Sarsaparilla* (in which I had the honor of making my operatic debut as narrator). It's a beautifully constructed, melodic and evocative opera (and singularly faithful to the original); and I'm sure you'll be hearing it soon from some small Opera Theater in your area. At least three other Bradbury-based operas are now being written by recognized composers; and there's talk of a full-scale musical version of THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES for Broadway!

The original text of *A Scent of Sarsaparilla* makes its second anthology appearance in William Sloane's STORIES FOR TOMORROW (Funk & Wagnalls, $3.95), along with Bradbury's splendid *The Wilderness* (F&SF, November, 1952). In a way, these two stories, appearing early in the volume, set the keynote for the entire book: the literary level is much higher than in most anthologies, the stories are largely familiar from previous collections, and the stress is upon human interest and emotional impact to the almost complete exclusion of all the other factors (adventure, social satire, technological ingenuity, and particularly humor) that go to make up the cosmos of science fiction.

This is because Mr. Sloane has, quite deliberately and wisely, not edited his volume for you or for me, but for the general reader who either fears or scorns s.f., and who may have read a little Bradbury, but certainly nothing else in the field. As a tempting introduction, the book should fulfill its purpose nicely. For you who need no luring, it offers generous size (almost equal to five issues of this magazine) and a reasonable number of good stories new to book form — particularly Raymond F. Jones's novelet *Noise Level*, a fine summation of recent trends in new thought in *Astounding*.

Although general readers have been slow in coming around to our specialties, we have always been interested in imaginative works published as general literature. Two brief recent items particularly deserve your attention, more for their pictures than for their text: Patricia Barnard's THE CONTEMPORARY MOUSE (Coward-McCann, $2.50), a little fantasy-fable on the nature of art with magnificent photographs by Edward J. Moore of animal sculptures in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; and Edward Gorey's THE LISTING ATTIC (Duell, Sloan & Pearce-Little, Brown, $2), a curious collection of 60 limericks, fantastic, morbid, even shocking, with wondrously macabre drawings by the author. Robert Shafer's THE CONQUERED PLACE (Putnam's, $3.50) is a long and pretentious "serious novel" on the s.f. theme of the future occupation of the U. S. by an unnamed but obviously Russian

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military force, and I regret to say that it fails equally as fiction and as extrapolation; for completists only. Two reprints demand your purchase: You probably know F. Scott Fitzgerald's superlative fantasy short stories, but may not be aware that his first novel, THIS SIDE OF PARADISE (Dell, 35c), contains strangely unresolved supernatural elements. And an urgent word on Henry James's THE TURN OF THE SCREW (Dell, 25c): I confess it was only on my fifth reading that I came to realize the full beauty and horror of this masterly short novel. If you have (like me for many years) thought it overrated, please try again!

Turning to books published directly for the s.f. trade, we find, rather surprisingly, only one novel in the month's crop, and that a negligible one: Thomas Calvert McClary's THREE THOUSAND YEARS (Fantasy Press, $3), an expansion of the 1938 *Astounding* serial, inept, improbable, and crudely written — well below McClary's earlier REBIRTH. But five collections of short stories strike a very high average indeed.

Fredric Brown's ANGELS AND SPACESHIPS (Dutton, $2.75) contains a little of everything, from screwball fantasy to sober science fiction, and from anthology favorites to nine brandnew short-shorts never before published anywhere. The only things that all 17 stories have in common are sparkling originality and delightfully crisp writing — qualities that you'll also find in the highly welcome reprint of Brown's hilarious 1949 novel WHAT MAD UNIVERSE (Bantam, 25c). Of the nine stories in C. M. Kornbluth's THE EXPLORERS (Ballantine, 35c), three have been previously reprinted and one long and admirable one is brandnew. Again themes, styles and lengths are varied; but Kornbluth's sharp observation is everywhere present, and in most of the stories his bitter insight into the hearts and souls of future men (and by implication, into our own). Eric Frank Russell's DEEP SPACE (Fantasy Press, $3) is an equally distinguished collection and an even better edited one: all nine of the stories appear for the first time in book form, and all are so chosen as to form a cohesive series of comments upon human (and extra-human) relationships in spaceflight and colonization. *The Timid Tiger* is as good an example as I know of Russell's quiet reasonableness and gentle (almost tender) humor; and the others are not unworthy of it.

The Brown, Kornbluth and Russell books are volumes of shorts as satisfactory as you can purchase. You may have more mixed feelings about the remaining two: Wilson Tucker's THE SCIENCE-FICTION SUBTREASURY (Rinehart, $2.75) contains ten stories (one previously anthologized, two brandnew) smoothly and entertainingly told, but largely pretty trivial for commercial publication. Tucker's introduction rightly stresses the need for lighthearted irreverence in s.f.; but even an irreverent story (as Brown so well demonstrates) must be a *story*. Lewis Padgett's LINE TO TOMORROW

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(Bantam, 25c) is consistently top-grade Padgett, which means a superlative combination of literary quality, narrative drive and detailed scientific or fantastic thinking; the one drawback is that all of the seven stories have (setting a new record) been previously reprinted . . . but they reread so well that your quarter is still a good investment.

Among recent anthologies, THE GIANT ANTHOLOGY OF SCIENCE FICTION, edited by Leo Margulies and Oscar J. Friend (Merlin, $3.95), is almost as long as the Sloane collection, but very different in intent. This is a selection of ten novelets and short novels, eight of them new to book form, deliberately specializing in the purest wild-adventure space opera . . . and in its own way, it too may win converts. There's no pretension to literary value here, and hardly a trace of genuine scientific extrapolation; but bad though some entries are, the sheer interstellar adventure story can be grand fun when told by Edmond Hamilton or Manly Wade Wellman. Excerpts from an earlier Margulies-Friend anthology, MY BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORY, have now been reprinted (Pocket Books, 25c); again the average quality is not high, but the book does contain a good Jack Williamson, and Eando Binder's best story, *Teacher from Mars*. Donald A. Wollheim's ADVENTURES IN THE FAR FUTURE and TALES OF OUTER SPACE (Ace, 35c) is a double-anthology adding up to well over 100,000 words — a markedly mixed lot (with young writers Poul Anderson and Chad Oliver leading the field), but a bargain in length, price and the fact that all ten of its stories are new to anthologies.

The year's most unbelievable anthology is easily THE YEAR AFTER TOMORROW, edited by Lester del Rey, Cecile Matschat and Carl Carmer (Winston, $3), in which editor del Rey's fine story *Kindness* sheds a lonely glimmer over an arid desert of tales chosen (God knows why!) from *American Boy* around 1930, primitive crudities which not even the youngest reader should endure. The most recent novel in the Winston juvenile series, Donald A. Wollheim's THE SECRET OF SATURN'S RINGS (Winston, $2), is not much better.

The following books are noted in case you have access to a store which deals in British imports; I'm afraid this is a little beyond the scope of F&SF's Book Order Service. John Carnell's GATEWAY TO TOMORROW (London: Museum Press, 9/6) is a solidly interesting anthology devoted to convincing the English reader that Great Britain is producing some first-rate science fiction of her own — as stories by Wyndham, Clarke, McIntosh and Christopher ably demonstrate. H. J. Campbell's TOMORROW'S UNIVERSE (London: Panther, 8/6) is a selection of American s.f., all overlooked by U. S. anthologists — sometimes, one feels, with good cause; but neglected stories by Kris Neville, Chad Oliver and particularly A. E. van

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Vogt are outstanding. SPRAGUE DE CAMP'S NEW ANTHOLOGY OF SCIENCE FICTION (London: Panther, 7/6) is most misleadingly titled; it is not an anthology edited by de Camp, but a group of six de Camp stories selected by H. J. Campbell. All new to book form, they're a drab assemblage of unfunny humor and (what is even less forgivable) unsexy sex.

Robert A. Heinlein's STAR LUMMOX (F&SF, May–June–July, 1954) has now appeared in hard covers as THE STAR BEAST (Scribner's, $2.50), in a version some 10% longer than the magazine form. Lummox is still the same uniquely charming beast, if (to my taste, at least) foully maligned by artist Clifford Geary.

New Readers' Book Service

Last Month Fantasy and Science Fiction initiated a new and unique service!

Because bookstores are less common than they should be in this country, and stores with a complete science-fantasy stock are even scarcer, you can now order direct from us any hard-cover book reviewed in this magazine. (Sorry, but we cannot offer this service on paper-bound books.)

By ordering through Fantasy House you receive many advantages: you are assured of quick, efficient service; you save valuable time because you can order books from several publishers at once without having to write separate requests for each title you desire; and you save on postage. Turn to page 2 for the handy order coupon and a partial listing of some of the excellent books available to you through this new service. And remember, you can order not only the books we have listed, but any other hard-cover book reviewed in Recommended Reading during the past year, including this month's fine selections!

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This neat blend of the supernatural and space travel might be termed a science fictional warning to the curious. Readers of science-fantasy in this sixth decade of the Twentieth Century have learned enough about the moon to know it shouldn't be wished for; wise readers know enough about demons and their ways with wishes to have no truck with the tricky imps.

Wish for the Moon

by GLEN HENEXSON

HAVE ANOTHER CUP of coffee, Rog. It's cold enough outside to freeze you solid. I might have known you'd get around to asking me why I didn't go to the moon last year with the First Expedition, when I had the chance. Everybody asks.

But I've never told anyone, up to now. Knew too well they'd say "medieval nonsense!" and that would be that. After all, a man does like to be believed.

It's all because of a night just like this. You know, one of those nights when you huddle around a fire with your friends, talk about everything, and pretend it isn't cold and dark outside? I was still back East then, at a small out-of-the-way college, teaching math and enjoying being nondescript. One night I went to visit a friend on the faculty, one of those graying, pipe-smoking men who look like professors and usually are.

John Carley's ten-year-old daughter opened the door to me, and behind her I could see Carley — he was a widower — adding fresh wood to the flames in the fireplace. He and I settled down naturally to a rambling bull session, the kind that comes so easily on long evenings. We started out with literature, that was Carley's specialty, and somehow or other Charles Fort got into the conversation — if you could call what he wrote literature. We gave him and the whole subject of "unexplained happenings" a thorough verbal going over, pro and con, and I was considering the matter closed when Professor Carley veered off onto the subject of legends.

"Speaking of the repetition of the inexplicable — all one need do is search through folk tales. One finds the same tales, with minor variations, repeated in all sorts of cultures and in a great many languages, from the most primitive to the most advanced. One is forced to believe that

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some of these constantly recurring incidents must really have happened."

"For instance?" I prompted.

"Well, for one," he waggled a professorial finger at me, "you could take the story of a great flood, found in folk literature all over the world. My theory is that there must really have been such a universal flood sometime to leave such a residue of stories. But to get onto ground Fort would have liked better, consider the old fairy tales about making wishes and having them granted. They crop up everywhere in folk tales. You know, the stories where you say some magic words and make some magic signs and thereby summon up your demon, or fairy, or what-have-you. He gives you your wishes, then retires to his fiery nether regions, and everything ends happily."

"Or unhappily!" I put in. "Remember how many of those stories are used to illustrate the folly of getting something for nothing? In a lot of cases, the guy makes a wish, or two or three, and finds he has wished very badly indeed! I could recite you a whole list of them: the woman in the story of the enchanted flounder, the man who wished his wife would have a pudding on her nose, old King Midas, and so on. What about those?"

"Doesn't prove they weren't true," the professor said, getting up and pacing about the room as he always did when he was really interested in the conversation. "Maybe human beings are like that — don't know what's good for them when they've got the whole world handed to them on a silver platter."

"And have you ever thought what *you* would do, John?" I asked him. "I'll lay you five to one your wishes wouldn't be any better than the wishes of all those other poor fish!"

"There's nothing like finding out!" he grinned at me. He walked over to a well-stocked shelf and took down a dusty, tattered book.

"You may not know it, my friend, but you are looking at a genuine Twelfth Century volume of incantations and assorted spells. Picked it up in a Paris bookstall last year. To be quite honest with you I've always been just a bit afraid to try any of them. Now that I've got witnesses, scoffing witnesses at that, plus the proper atmosphere, think I'll try a small incantation. Perhaps we'll see, my cynical friend, just how my wishes stack up against my — ah, predecessors."

Carley's daughter Janice had been drawn into the conversation by now, at least in a listening capacity, and we watched while her father leafed through the brittle pages.

"Here's what we're looking for — a de luxe demon summoner. Brew up the proper potion, say the proper words, and up pops a demon ready and willing to grant your three wishes. I haven't laid in the necessary ingredi-

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ents for the brew — they don't sell batwings at the supermarket — so we'll probably have to settle for a demon junior grade."

I went along with the gag. "Sure," I said. "I'm perfectly willing to see you summon up a green-eyed demon, complete with horns and a brass band. What do I have to do?"

"You and Janice just sit back and relax," he laughed. "This is living room magic. I'll be the reader of the spell, and of course the fireplace will have to do for the witches' fire."

We were all taking the hocus-pocus in stride, and Janice in particular was enjoying herself tremendously, her eyes wide with excitement.

Carley left the room and came back a few moments later in a wine-red dressing gown, which reflected the fire flames in an appropriately weird way. His gray hair, which he had ruffed up, looked like a nimbus of some ancient alchemist. I'll say this much for him, he certainly played his part well.

He sprinkled some sort of powder into the flames and started his spiel. It was impressive enough. Must have taken five or six minutes, all in Latin and some other language I guessed was a lot older than Latin, sprinkling the powder and reading the ritual. Then when he was finished there was a little *poof!* of green flame and a noise like a small explosion. The professor started back from the fireplace, put a look of mock surprise on his face, and announced, "It's finished. The demon is here!"

Being an adult, and therefore supposedly less naïve than Janice, I was certain Carley's powders had caused the green flame and the explosion, but the kid was wild with excitement.

"Where is he, Daddy, where is he?" she cried.

"You can't see him, Janice," he explained with mock gravity. "But he's here, just the same. Got to be, you know. I read the incantation to summon him."

"What's his name? What's his name?"

"Take it easy, moppet," he chided her, pressing her back on the sofa. "I can't tell you his name or you'd be summoning him up all the time — that's the whole catch with an incantation. You call a demon by his right name and under the right conditions and he has to obey you. All we've got to do now is wish! Three of them, but don't make them too big — he's not very powerful, you know. Who's first, now?"

Janice calmed down and looked us over. "You take the first, Frank," she said, speaking to me. "Then Daddy can have the second wish, and I'll take the last one. Then if either of you've made bad wishes, maybe I can correct them. What're you gonna wish for, huh?"

"That's easy," I laughed. "I'll wish for something practical and insig-

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nificant enough for even a small-size wish-granter to handle. Say — a star sapphire the size of an egg."

John Carley glanced at me with a "You should live so long" look and started to make his wish. "I —" he paused, and I could see he remembered my jibe that he wouldn't make a wise wish. "It's a pretty big responsibility," he hedged. Then his face brightened with sudden inspiration. "I know what I'll do. I'll reserve my wish for Janice, so that whatever she wishes, I'll wish too, along with her, and that way, it'll stand more of a chance to come true. After all, our demon didn't get his brew, you know, and he's pretty small," he said, looking at Janice apologetically.

I could almost see the wheels turning in her head, as she paced around the room in imitation of her father, trying to think of a wish.

"Here it comes," I whispered to Carley. "You'll be busy for the next six months buying the things that kid's going to wish for."

Apparently he had the same idea, for he smiled ruefully and shrugged his shoulders, looking just a little sorry he had ever started the game.

Janice had stopped by the window, and was looking up at something outside. "I know what I wish for!" she exclaimed suddenly. I looked into the fireplace, with that half-shamed feeling you get when you know some parent is going to get the works. Poor Carley, I thought. This is it. Then I heard Janice say clearly, loudly, "I wish for the biggest brightest thing there ever was. I wish for the MOON!"

I kept looking at the flames, where they danced their weird dances, changing colors, looking first like fiery angel wings, then like demons . . .

I noticed there had been no more sound from John or Janice. I looked up. The room was deserted. I got up, half-laughing. What were these two trying to pull now? I walked slowly through five rooms and a bath. They were empty. I went outside and circled the house. The wind whined ever so slightly, and overhead the moon was very, very bright. I felt a cold place in my middle, but my head was awfully hot. . . .

I went inside, but I didn't call the police or hospitals, or do anything dramatic. But I didn't sleep either. The flames in the fireplace were unbearable. I put them out carefully and huddled near a radiator until dawn. I didn't think of anything in particular.

When morning came I put on my coat and left the house. I felt in my pocket for my tobacco pouch, then measured a pipe full. In the last few grains, something bright and glittering fell out, landing atop the tobacco in the pipe like a cherry on a sundae. I grasped it carefully between my fingertips and held it up to the sun. It was small, so small I knew I would never be taking it to a jeweler, but it shone with the fire of the sun, and in its center was a perfect star.

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"But," I mumbled out loud, "I asked for one the size of an egg." After a while I got it. It took me a few minutes but then, I wasn't very sharp that morning. That particular star sapphire was as big as an egg . . . a salmon egg.

I knew then what had happened to John Carley and his daughter . . . and I knew *how* it had happened.

But it wasn't until last year, when the First Lunar Expedition reached the moon, without me, that the rest of the world knew. Near Tycho they found two people. Both of them dead, of course: no oxygen. A young girl, maybe ten or eleven, frozen and perfectly preserved in that airless vacuum. A distinguished looking man, with graying hair, lay beside her. He was equally frozen, equally well preserved, and his red dressing gown gleamed like a ruby under the searchlights of the landing party.

Naturally, the authorities kicked up quite a ruckus and, for a while, newspapers and telecasters played it all very big. At first it was argued that another rocket had left earth before the First Expedition but, for obvious reasons, that theory was soon discarded.

As Charles Fort proved long ago, even science can, on occasion, believe what it wants to believe, so the learned gents decided the man and the little girl came from another planet. Not in our System, of course. But from a planet just like ours, circling another star. Alpha Centauri, maybe. That tied it up in a neat package and "explained" the coincidence of their clothing.

So after a while it was all forgotten and no one ever thought to connect it up with the strange disappearance of John Carley and his daughter Janice. . . .

Even I am not exactly sure why it happened. Unless it's another case of Mohammed and the mountain. Put yourself in the demon's position. When you're not strong enough to bring the moon to people, why then . . .

After all, I've got proof he was a very small demon.

Note:

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In which Mr. Farmer introduces the anthropological school of psychiatry, suggests a new cure for compulsive drinking, and hints that the title of Freud's classic work may contain a meaning which the Master never suspected.

Totem and Taboo

by PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER

KATHY PHELAN told her fiancé, "Jay, you can take your choice. Give up drinking or give up me."

Jay Martin was convinced she meant it. Her triangular face was set in tense lines, and her slanting green eyes burned.

He made one more protest. "But, kitten, I'm not an alcoholic. Just a light-heavy drinker, almost a middleweight, you might say."

She bared little sharp teeth with extraordinarily long canines.

"Flyweight, shmyweight, what's the difference? You're no champ. You never go more than six rounds before you're flat on your back."

Pretty as a prize Siamese — and her bite was as sharp. Sadly, Jay Martin said he would, of course, not hesitate a moment about his choice. She smiled and purred and ran her little red-pink tongue out to moisten her lips for his goodby kiss.

Like a wounded crow dragging his broken wing behind him, Jay Martin limped into the Green Lizard Lounge. It was the best place he could think of in which to brood over his decision not to drink anymore. A dry Martini was just the thing in which to mingle sorrow and anger.

Ivan Tursiops entered a moment later, almost literally dived into a huge schooner of beer, rolled and reveled in it, then, after blowing and snorting relief and rhapsody, condescended to listen to Jay's story. He was properly sympathetic.

"You can't help your urge towards the bottle, you know," he said. "What you need is a good psychiatrist."

"The only one I know is an alcoholic."

"Oh, now, he's not the only one in the world. The trouble with you, my boy, is you don't hobnob with enough neurotics. Now I've dozens for friends, and every one swears by a different witch doctor. But I've heard

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recently of one fellow who's so good I'm afraid to see him. I might lose my neurosis, you know, and I couldn't afford that."

"You mean your total inability to hear your mother-in-law?"

"Exactly. Look, here's his address. The new Medical Arts Building."

Doctor Capra pulled on his chin-whiskers and said, "Yes, I'm of a new school of thought. We take the anthropological approach. Have you read the recent authoritative article on our theories in the August *Commuter's Digest?*"

Jay nodded. Dr. Capra looked pleased and glanced at his watch. His waiting room was full.

"Then you know the essentials. Why waste time repeating them? You must be an intelligent man; you graduated from college. Business administration, I believe?"

"Yes, Doctor. Look, Kathy loves me, but she dominates me. She wants to run every minute of my life. And . . ."

"Never mind that, Mr. Martin. Or may I call you Jay? Pay no attention to what your fiancée is doing. I assure you the Freudians and their mother-complexes were way off. It's not at all necessary that I know your personal difficulties. We —"

"But she's made me give up almost everything I like. Now, I don't mind . . ."

"All that's of no consequence at all, Jay. Ha! *Hmm!*"

The doctor was holding up four photographs of Jay, each made from a different angle. He stroked his chin-whiskers. "Excellent. No border case here. You're definitely the avian type."

Ignoring Jay's torrential story of his conflicts with Kathy, he said, "Look at the tall thin and gangling body. Stork. Look at the shock of hair. Kingfisher. Big round eyes. Owl. Hooked nose. Falcon. Big and friendly but slightly mocking grin. Laughing jackass."

"Say!" said Jay. " I resent —"

"No doubt of it, young man. You're a classical type. There'll be no trouble at all, at all."

Dr. Capra rubbed his hands in professional glee and then handed Jay Martin a pillbox. "One every two hours, my boy, until your tutelary totem appears."

"What?"

"You read the article, didn't you? You know that primitive societies were quite correct in dividing their people into clans, each of which had a guiding and protecting spirit or totem modeled after a particular animal, don't you? We psychiatrists of the anthropological school have found that

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the primitives unconsciously stumbled over a great truth. Every man is, in his subconscious, a bear or fox or weasel or magpie or pig, or what have you. Watch your friends. Observe their types of bodies, their faces, their actions, their characters. All modeled upon some zoological prototype.

"This pill is the result of our collaborations with the neurologists and biochemists. It organizes your subconscious so that your subjective totem seems to be projected objectively. In fact, it may be, for all we know, for we've never succeeded in catching one. However . . ."

"But, Doctor, don't you want to hear what my trouble is? Kathy says . . ."

Capra glanced at his wrist watch, stood up, smiling, and gently butted Jay out of the office with his hands.

"Come back at this time next week. I can give you five minutes."

"But, Doc, Kathy says I drink too much!"

Capra stopped, frowned, and pulled on his yellow-brown goatee.

"I knew there was something. Ah, yes, don't drink any liquor while you're taking these pills, my boy. Might disorganize the subconscious, you know."

"But, but . . . !"

"Not now, Mister Martin."

Ivan Tursiops looked up from the depths of his beer.

"How'd it go?"

"I just told Kathy. Her fur really bristled; I was lucky to get away with only a verbal mauling. She says I should ignore Capra's corn. All I need is a strong will power. If I loved her enough, I'd . . ."

Ivan beckoned to the waitress.

"Dry martini."

"No, thanks," said Jay. "Doctor's orders. And Kathy threatened to scratch my eyes out if I ever came around with liquor on my breath again. Everybody's against me. . . ."

The waitress set down the martini. Absently, broodingly, Jay sipped. Ivan said, "Pay no attention to either, my boy. I was just talking to Bob White, and he said he knows a hell of a good psychiatrist who uses the over-do-it approach. Just what you need. If your neurosis is alcohol, you don't try to quit hitting the bottle. You try to drink *too* much."

Jay downed his martini. His eyes were bright. "Yeah? Tell me more."

"Waitress!"

Jay Martin awoke at noon the following day. Because it was Saturday and he didn't have to work, he didn't care that it was so late. But he did

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mind that he had to wake up at all. Seven martinis before he lost count. That meant a head the size of the *Hindenburg* and one just as ready to burst into flames. He'd be riding a seismograph of nausea and . . .

But he wasn't. His head was clear as a freshly wiped cocktail glass, and his nerves firm as a bartender's hand scooping up a tip.

It was then that he saw, perched on the foot of his bed, the bird.

The jagbird.

It was big as a bald eagle. It *was* bald, and the bags under its squinting bloodshot eyes were packed with dissipation. Its long bulbous red beak hung open to expose a swollen tongue with purple hair. Its frizzled black plumage reeked of stale beer; its breath was the morning-after's.

If Jay had not felt so healthy, he would have sworn that this was the first hallucination of an attack of D.T.'s.

"Go away!" he said.

"Nevermore!" croaked the jagbird.

It was some time before Jay understood that the phrase was not a reply to his request that it leave. It was, literally, Jay's usual vow on awakening after a hard night.

Jay got up and made some coffee. While he was drinking it, the bird flew in and perched on the chair across the table.

"Nevermore!"

If it hadn't been for the creature, Jay would have been able to eat a hearty breakfast, something he hadn't done for several years.

He got up and walked out. The bird flew through the door just as he opened it. And it insisted on perching upon his shoulder and croaking every sixty seconds, regular and monotonous as a metronome, "Nevermore!"

When he brushed it away, it flapped heavily above him so its shadow always fell on Jay's head.

Jay was afraid to visit Kathy, so he went to a movie. The bird flew in with him, nor was it asked for a ticket. When Jay sat down, it perched upon his shoulder. The woman behind Jay did not seem to be bothered by it, so he decided that it must be a hallucination. It was a visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory triumph for Dr. Capra's little pills. Jay wanted to read the riot act to the psychiatrist, but he was afraid that he would be asked if he'd been drinking liquor while taking the pills. Not only had he done so, he had swallowed all of them at once during a fit of bravado when Ivan Tursiops had said that they were probably nothing but sugar.

At exactly 5 o'clock, the jagbird disappeared. Puzzled but elated, Jay left the movie a few minutes later. It was not until he was just about to step into the Green Lizard that he remembered his hangovers always left him at that time.

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He raised his eyebrows and went on in. His eyebrows soared even higher when he saw the bird sitting on the bar, waiting for him. Jay ignored it and ordered a martini. He lifted it to his lips.

"*Hic!*" belched the bird.

At the same time it breathed in his face.

"Aagh!"

"What's the matter?" said the bartender. "You chokin' or somepin?"

"Can't you smell it?" wheezed Jay.

"Smell what?"

"Nothing."

The jagbird had put one heavy foot on the edge of the glass. Its talon, like a waiter's dirty thumb, dipped into the drink. Its red eyes, purple in the lounge's dim light, squinted reproachfully.

"*Hic!*" it said.

"*Haec!*" sneered Jay.

"*Hoc!*" trumped the bird.

"Heck!" groaned Jay.

He left the martini untouched. He couldn't argue with a bird who could decline Latin.

Kathy was so pleased to see Jay sober and with not even the hint of liquor on his breath that she almost purred. Her suspicion-slanted eyes widened into a soft golden-green.

"Oh, Jay, you've really sworn off. You love me!"

Her kiss was more than warm. He didn't enjoy it as much as he should, and she felt it. She stiffened, narrowed her eyes, and put her sharp nails on his arm.

"What's the matter? Aren't you happy? Do you regret doing this for me?"

"Bring me a drink."

"What? I will not!"

"Oh, I won't touch it . . . I think."

Kathy sensed urgency. She went to the liquor cabinet and poured a scotch. He watched her and wondered again why he had to give up drinking when she wouldn't. She had explained that she did not *have* to drink, but he did. Would he be a dog-in-the-manger and ask her to give up her harmless enjoyment because it was for him a vicious habit? Feeling like a selfish brute, he had said no. But he couldn't help a little bitterness.

She handed him the scotch. Instantly, the jagbird stuck its big bulbous beak between cup and lip.

"*Hic!*"

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Jay handed the glass back to Kathy.

"See?"

She didn't. He explained. Instead of relaxing, her eyes slitted even more, and her nails scratched his arm.

"Do you mean this bird will *always* be with us? Even after we're married? We'll *never* be alone?"

There was no soft plaintive note in her voice. Only a hiss of anger and determination.

He patted her arm. "It's not a real bird, kitten. *You* can't see it."

"No, but I'll know it's there! I won't be able to forget it. It'll make me nervous as a cat! Not only that, but I don't like your giving up liquor because of some crazy bird. I want you to do it on your own will power, to stand on your own two feet."

"If it weren't for my totem," he said, "I'd not be standing on my feet now. I'd be under the table at the Green Lizard."

"That's what I thought!" she spat. "Where is this jagbird now?"

He jerked his thumb at the end table, where it perched, sleepy-eyed, upon the ceramic bust of a Silenus. She stared vainly, burst into tears, and said, "Oh, if only I could see it! If only . . ."

She stopped and dried her eyes. She became soft and furry-voiced.

"What is the address of this Dr. Capra, honey?"

It was a moment before he could see what she intended doing. She looked unconcernedly at him and even yawned, as if the whole matter had all at once become of no importance.

He blinked rapidly, like a startled owl. The outlines of her body had wavered and then congealed. They had remained fixed for only the space of a wink, but long enough. There was no mistaking the long bristling whiskers, the fangs revealed by the yawn, and the narrow-pupiled eyes. Nor the I'm-about-to-swallow-the-canary expression.

He strode past her, scooped up the jagbird, and lunged through the door.

Kathy screamed, "Jay, come back!"

"Nevermore!" croaked the bird, its head sticking out from under its owner's arm.

Jay Martin is now married to a little woman with a spaniel's big brown eyes. Her devotion to him has been described by their friends as dog-like. They act like two lovebirds. He no longer drinks like a fish, and he has become a whale of a success in the business world. He seems to be gifted with some uncanny instinct which enables him to judge a person's character at a glance. Last year he joined the bulls, cornered the bears, and made a big killing among the wolves of Wall Street.

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Are they, as usual, overheating your apartment now that winter is setting in? Then read this latest fruit of the strange imagination of Philip K. Dick, guaranteed to bring an alien chill into the stuffiest steam-heated room.

The Father-Thing

by PHILIP K. DICK

"DINNER'S READY," commanded Mrs. Walton. "Go get your father and tell him to wash his hands. The same applies to you, young man." She carried a steaming casserole to the neatly set table. "You'll find him out in the garage."

Charles hesitated. He was only eight years old, and the problem bothering him would have confounded Hillel. "I — " he began uncertainly.

"What's wrong?" June Walton caught the uneasy tone in her son's voice and her matronly bosom fluttered with sudden alarm. "Isn't Ted out in the garage? For heaven's sake, he was sharpening the hedge shears a minute ago. He didn't go over to the Andersons', did he? I told him dinner was practically on the table."

"He's in the garage," Charles said. "But he's — talking to himself."

"Talking to himself!" Mrs. Walton removed her bright plastic apron and hung it over the doorknob. "Ted? Why, he never talks to himself. Go tell him to come in here." She poured boiling black coffee in the little blue-and-white china cups and began ladling out creamed corn. "What's wrong with you? Go tell him!"

"I don't know which of them to tell," Charles blurted out desperately. "They both look alike."

June Walton's fingers lost their hold on the aluminum pan; for a moment the creamed corn slushed dangerously. "Young man —" she began angrily, but at that moment Ted Walton came striding into the kitchen, inhaling and sniffing and rubbing his hands together.

"Ah," he cried happily. "Lamb stew."

"Beef stew," June murmured. "Ted, what were you doing out there?"

Ted threw himself down at his place and unfolded his napkin. "I got the shears sharpened like a razor. Oiled and sharpened. Better not touch them

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— they'll cut your hand off." He was a good-looking man in his early thirties; thick blond hair, strong arms, competent hands, square face and flashing brown eyes. "Man, this stew looks good. Hard day at the office — Friday, you know. Stuff piles up and we have to get all the accounts out by five. Al McKinley claims the department could handle 20 per cent more stuff if we organized our lunch hours; staggered them so somebody was there all the time." He beckoned Charles over. "Sit down and let's go."

Mrs. Walton served the frozen peas. "Ted," she said, as she slowly took her seat, "is there anything on your mind?"

"On my mind?" He blinked. "No, nothing unusual. Just the regular stuff. Why?"

Uneasily, June Walton glanced over at her son. Charles was sitting bolt-upright at his place, face expressionless, white as chalk. He hadn't moved, hadn't unfolded his napkin or even touched his milk. A tension was in the air; she could feel it. Charles had pulled his chair away from his father's; he was huddled in a tense little bundle as far from his father as possible. His lips were moving, but she couldn't catch what he was saying.

"What is it?" she demanded, leaning toward him.

"*The other one*," Charles was muttering under his breath. "The other one came in."

"What do you mean, dear?" June Walton asked out loud. "What other one?"

Ted jerked. A strange expression flitted across his face. It vanished at once; but in the brief instant Ted Walton's face lost all familiarity. Something alien and cold gleamed out, a twisting, wriggling mass. The eyes blurred and receded, as an archaic sheen filmed over them. The ordinary look of a tired, middle-aged husband was gone.

And then it was back — or nearly back. Ted grinned and began to wolf down his stew and frozen peas and creamed corn. He laughed, stirred his coffee, kidded and ate. But something terrible was wrong.

"The other one," Charles muttered, face white, hands beginning to tremble. Suddenly he leaped up and backed away from the table. "Get away!" he shouted. "Get out of here!"

"Hey," Ted rumbled ominously. "What's got into you?" He pointed sternly at the boy's chair. "You sit down there and eat your dinner, young man. Your mother didn't fix it for nothing."

Charles turned and ran out of the kitchen, upstairs to his room. June Walton gasped and fluttered in dismay. "What in the world —"

Ted went on eating. His face was grim; his eyes were hard and dark. "That kid," he grated, "is going to have to learn a few things. Maybe he and I need to have a little private conference together."

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Charles crouched and listened.

The father-thing was coming up the stairs, nearer and nearer. "Charles!" it shouted angrily. "Are you up there?"

He didn't answer. Soundlessly, he moved back into his room and pulled the door shut. His heart was pounding heavily. The father-thing had reached the landing; in a moment it would come in his room.

He hurried to the window. He was terrified; it was already fumbling in the dark hall for the knob. He lifted the window and climbed out on the roof. With a grunt he dropped into the flower garden that ran by the front door, staggered and gasped, then leaped to his feet and ran from the light that streamed out the window, a patch of yellow in the evening darkness.

He found the garage; it loomed up ahead, a black square against the skyline. Breathing quickly, he fumbled in his pocket for his flashlight, then cautiously slid the door up and entered.

The garage was empty. The car was parked out front. To the left was his father's workbench. Hammers and saws on the wooden walls. In the back were the lawnmower, rake, shovel, hoe. A drum of kerosene. License plates nailed up everywhere. Floor was concrete and dirt; a great oil slick stained the center, tufts of weeds greasy and black in the flickering beam of the flashlight.

Just inside the door was a big trash barrel. On top of the barrel were stacks of soggy newspapers and magazines, moldy and damp. A thick stench of decay issued from them as Charles began to move them around. Spiders dropped to the cement and scampered off; he crushed them with his foot and went on looking.

The sight made him shriek. He dropped the flashlight and leaped wildly back. The garage was plunged into instant gloom. He forced himself to kneel down, and for an ageless moment, he groped in the darkness for the light, among the spiders and greasy weeds. Finally he had it again. He managed to turn the beam down into the barrel, down the well he had made by pushing back the piles of magazines.

The father-thing had stuffed it down in the very bottom of the barrel. Among the old leaves and torn-up cardboard, the rotting remains of magazines and curtains, rubbish from the attic his mother had lugged down here with the idea of burning someday. It still looked a little like his father enough for him to recognize. He had found it — and the sight made him sick at his stomach. He hung onto the barrel and shut his eyes until finally he was able to look again. In the barrel were the remains of his father, his real father. Bits the father-thing had no use for. Bits it had discarded.

He got the rake and pushed it down to stir the remains. They were dry. They cracked and broke at the touch of the rake. They were like a discarded snake skin, flaky and crumbling, rustling at the touch. *An empty skin.*

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The insides were gone. The important part. This was all that remained, just the brittle, cracking skin, wadded down at the bottom of the trash barrel in a little heap. This was all the father-thing had left; it had eaten the rest. Taken the insides — and his father's place.

A sound.

He dropped the rake and hurried to the door. The father-thing was coming down the path, toward the garage. Its shoes crushed the gravel; it felt its way along uncertainly. "Charles!" it called angrily. "Are you in there? Wait'll I get my hands on you, young man!"

His mother's ample, nervous shape was outlined in the bright doorway of the house. "Ted, please don't hurt him. He's all upset about something."

"I'm not going to hurt him," the father-thing rasped; it halted to strike a match. "I'm just going to have a little talk with him. He needs to learn better manners. Leaving the table like that and running out at night, climbing down the roof—"

Charles slipped from the garage; the glare of the match caught his moving shape, and with a bellow the father-thing lunged forward.

"*Come here!*"

Charles ran. He knew the ground better than the father-thing; it knew a lot, had taken a lot when it got his father's insides, but nobody knew the way like *he* did. He reached the fence, climbed it, leaped into the Anderson's yard, raced past their clothesline, down the path around the side of their house, and out on Maple Street.

He listened, crouched down and not breathing. The father-thing hadn't come after him. It had gone back. Or it was coming around the sidewalk.

He took a deep, shuddering breath. He had to keep moving. Sooner or later it would find him. He glanced right and left, made sure it wasn't watching, and then started off at a rapid dog-trot.

"What do you want?" Tony Peretti demanded belligerently. Tony was fourteen. He was sitting at the table in the oak-panelled Peretti dining room, books and pencils scattered around him, half a ham-and-peanut-butter sandwich and a coke beside him. "You're Walton, aren't you?"

Tony Peretti had a job uncrating stoves and refrigerators after school at Johnson's Appliance Shop, downtown. He was big and blunt-faced. Black hair, olive skin, white teeth. A couple of times he had beaten up Charles; he had beaten up every kid in the neighborhood.

Charles twisted. "Say, Peretti. Do me a favor?"

"What do you want?" Peretti was annoyed. "You looking for a bruise?"

Gazing unhappily down, his fists clenched, Charles explained what had happened in short, mumbled words.

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When he had finished, Peretti let out a low whistle. "No kidding."

"It's true." He nodded quickly. "I'll show you. Come on and I'll show you."

Peretti got slowly to his feet. "Yeah, show me. I want to see."

He got his b.b. gun from his room, and the two of them walked silently up the dark street, toward Charles' house. Neither of them said much. Peretti was deep in thought, serious and solemn-faced. Charles was still dazed; his mind was completely blank.

They turned down the Anderson driveway, cut through the back yard, climbed the fence, and lowered themselves cautiously into Charles' backyard. There was no movement. The yard was silent. The front door of the house was closed.

They peered through the living room window. The shades were down, but a narrow crack of yellow streamed out. Sitting on the couch was Mrs. Walton, sewing a cotton T-shirt. There was a sad, troubled look on her large face. She worked listlessly, without interest. Opposite her was the father-thing. Leaning back in his father's easy chair, its shoes off, reading the evening newspaper. The TV was on, playing to itself in the corner. A can of beer rested on the arm of the easy chair. The father-thing sat exactly as his own father had sat; it had learned a lot.

"Looks just like him," Peretti whispered suspiciously. "You sure you're not bulling me?"

Charles led him to the garage and showed him the trash barrel. Peretti reached his long tanned arms down and carefully pulled up the dry, flaking remains. They spread out, unfolded, until the whole figure of his father was outlined. Peretti laid the remains on the floor and pieced broken parts back into place. The remains were colorless. Almost transparent. An amber yellow, thin as paper. Dry and utterly lifeless.

"That's all," Charles said. Tears welled up in his eyes. "That's all that's left of him. The thing has the insides."

Peretti had turned pale. Shakily, he crammed the remains back in the trash barrel. "This is really something," he muttered. "You say you saw the two of them together?"

"Talking. They looked exactly alike. I ran inside." Charles wiped the tears away and sniveled; he couldn't hold it back any longer. "It ate him while I was inside. Then it came in the house. It pretended it was him. But it isn't. It killed him and ate his insides."

For a moment Peretti was silent. "I'll tell you something," he said suddenly. "I've heard about this sort of thing. It's a bad business. You have to use your head and not get scared. You're not scared, are you?"

"No," Charles managed to mutter.

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"The first thing we have to do is figure out how to kill it." He rattled his b.b. gun. "I don't know if this'll work. It must be plenty tough to get hold of your father. He was a big man." Peretti considered. "Let's get out of here. It might come back. They say that's what a murderer does."

They left the garage. Peretti crouched down and peeked through the window again. Mrs. Walton had got to her feet. She was talking anxiously. Vague sounds filtered out. The father-thing threw down its newspaper. They were arguing.

"For God's sake!" the father-thing shouted. "Don't do anything stupid like that."

"Something's wrong," Mrs. Walton moaned. "Something terrible. Just let me call the hospital and see."

"Don't call anybody. He's all right. Probably up the street playing."

"He's never out this late. He never disobeys. He was terribly upset — afraid of you! I don't blame him." Her voice broke with misery. "What's wrong with you? You're so strange." She moved out of the room, into the hall. "I'm going to call some of the neighbors."

The father-thing glared after her until she had disappeared. Then a terrifying thing happened. Charles gasped; even Peretti grunted under his breath.

"Look," Charles muttered. "What —"

"Golly," Peretti said, black eyes wide.

As soon as Mrs. Walton was gone from the room, the father-thing sagged in its chair. It became limp. Its mouth fell open. Its eyes peered vacantly. Its head fell forward, like a discarded rag doll.

Peretti moved away from the window. "That's it," he whispered. "That's the whole thing."

"What is it?" Charles demanded. He was shocked and bewildered. "It looked like somebody turned off its power."

"Exactly." Peretti nodded slowly, grim and shaken. "It's controlled from outside."

Horror settled over Charles. "You mean, something outside our world?"

Peretti shook his head with disgust. "Outside the house! In the yard. You know how to find?"

"Not very well." Charles pulled his mind together. "But I know somebody who's good at finding." He forced his mind to summon the name. "Bobby Daniels."

"That little colored kid? Is he good at finding?"

"The best."

"All right," Peretti said. "Let's go get him. We have to find the thing that's outside. That made *it* in there, and keeps it going. . . ."

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"It's near the garage," Peretti said to the small, thin-faced Negro boy who crouched beside them in the darkness. "When it got him, he was in the garage. So look there."

"In the garage?" Daniels asked.

"*Around* the garage. Walton's already gone over the garage, inside. Look around outside. Nearby."

There was a small bed of flowers growing by the garage, and a great tangle of bamboo and discarded debris between the garage and the back of the house. The moon had come out; a cold, misty light filtered down over everything. "If we don't find it pretty soon," Daniels said, "I got to go back home. I can't stay up much later." He wasn't any older than Charles. Perhaps nine.

"All right," Peretti agreed. "Then get looking."

The three of them spread out and began to go over the ground with care. Daniels worked with incredible speed; his thin little body moved in a blur of motion as he crawled among the flowers, turned over rocks, peered under the house, separated stalks of plants, ran his expert hands over leaves and stems, in tangles of compost and weeds. No inch was missed.

Peretti halted after a short time. "I'll guard. It might be dangerous. The father-thing might come and try to stop us." He posted himself on the back step with his b.b. gun while Charles and Bobby Daniels searched. Charles worked slowly. He was tired, and his body was cold and numb. It seemed impossible, the father-thing and what had happened to his own father, his real father. But terror spurred him on; what if it happened to his mother, or to him? Or to everyone? Maybe the whole world.

"I found it!" Daniels called in a thin, high voice. "You all come around here quick!"

Peretti raised his gun and got up cautiously. Charles hurried over; he turned the flickering yellow beam of his flashlight where Daniels stood.

The Negro boy had raised a concrete stone. In the moist, rotting soil the light gleamed on a metallic body. A thin, jointed thing with endless crooked legs was digging frantically. Plated, like an ant; a red-brown bug that rapidly disappeared before their eyes. Its rows of legs scabbled and clutched. The ground gave rapidly under it. Its wicked-looking tail twisted furiously as it struggled down the tunnel it had made.

Peretti ran into the garage and grabbed up the rake. He pinned down the tail of the bug with it. "Quick! Shoot it with the b.b. gun!"

Daniels snatched the gun and took aim. The first shot tore the tail of the bug loose. It writhed and twisted frantically; its tail dragged uselessly and some of its legs broke off. It was a foot long, like a great millipede. It struggled desperately to escape down its hole.

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"Shoot again," Peretti ordered.

Daniels fumbled with the gun. The bug slithered and hissed. Its head jerked back and forth; it twisted and bit at the rake holding it down. Its wicked specks of eyes gleamed with hatred. For a moment it struck futilely at the rake; then abruptly, without warning, it thrashed in a frantic convulsion that made them all draw away in fear.

Something buzzed through Charles' brain. A loud humming, metallic and harsh, a billion metal wires dancing and vibrating at once. He was tossed about violently by the force; the banging crash of metal made him deaf and confused. He stumbled to his feet and backed off; the others were doing the same, white-faced and shaken.

"If we can't kill it with the gun," Peretti gasped, "we can drown it. Or burn it. Or stick a pin through its brain." He fought to hold onto the rake, to keep the bug pinned down.

"I have a jar of formaldehyde," Daniels muttered. His fingers fumbled nervously with the b.b. gun. "How do this thing work? I can't seem to —"

Charles grabbed the gun from him. "I'll kill it." He squatted down, one eye to the sight, and gripped the trigger. The bug lashed and struggled. Its force-field hammered in his ears, but he hung onto the gun. His finger tightened . . .

"All right, Charles," the father-thing said. Powerful fingers gripped him, a paralyzing pressure around his wrists. The gun fell to the ground as he struggled futilely. The father-thing shoved against Peretti. The boy leaped away and the bug, free of the rake, slithered triumphantly down its tunnel.

"You have a spanking coming, Charles," the father-thing droned on. "What got into you? Your poor mother's out of her mind with worry."

It had been there, hiding in the shadows. Crouched in the darkness watching them. Its calm, emotionless voice, a dreadful parody of his father's, rumbled close to his ear as it pulled him relentlessly toward the garage. Its cold breath blew in his face, an icy-sweet odor, like decaying soil. Its strength was immense; there was nothing he could do.

"Don't fight me," it said calmly. "Come along, into the garage. This is for your own good. I know best, Charles."

"Did you find him?" his mother called anxiously, opening the back door.

"Yes, I found him."

"What are you going to do?"

"A little spanking." The father-thing pushed up the garage door. "In the garage." In the half-light a faint smile, humorless and utterly without emotion, touched its lips. "You go back in the living room, June. I'll take care of this. It's more in my line. You never did like punishing him."

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The back door reluctantly closed. As the light cut off, Peretti bent down and groped for the b.b. gun. The father-thing instantly froze.

"Go on home, boys," it rasped.

Peretti stood undecided, gripping the b.b. gun.

"Get going," the father-thing repeated. "Put down that toy and get out of here." It moved slowly toward Peretti, gripping Charles with one hand, reaching toward Peretti with the other. "No b.b. guns allowed in town, sonny. Your father know you have that? There's a city ordinance. I think you better give me that before —"

Peretti shot it in the eye.

The father-thing grunted and pawed at its ruined eye. Abruptly it slashed out at Peretti. Peretti moved down the driveway, trying to cock the gun. The father-thing lunged. Its powerful fingers snatched the gun from Peretti's hands. Silently, the father-thing mashed the gun against the wall of the house.

Charles broke away and ran numbly off. Where could he hide? It was between him and the house. Already, it was coming back toward him, a black shape creeping carefully, peering into the darkness, trying to make him out. Charles retreated. If there were only some place he could hide . . .

The bamboo.

He crept quickly into the bamboo. The stalks were huge and old. They closed after him with a faint rustle. The father-thing was fumbling in its pocket; it lit a match, then the whole pack flared up. "Charles," it said. "I know you're here, someplace. There's no use hiding. You're only making it more difficult."

His heart hammering, Charles crouched among the bamboo. Here, debris and filth rotted. Weeds, garbage, papers, boxes, old clothing, boards, tin cans, bottles. Spiders and salamanders squirmed around him. The bamboo swayed with the night wind. Insects and filth.

And something else.

A shape, a silent, unmoving shape that grew up from the mound of filth like some nocturnal mushroom. A white column, a pulpy mass that glistened moistly in the moonlight. Webs covered it, a moldy cocoon. It had vague arms and legs. An indistinct half-shaped head. As yet, the features hadn't formed. But he could tell what it was.

A mother-thing. Growing here in the filth and dampness, between the garage and the house. Behind the towering bamboo.

It was almost ready. Another few days and it would reach maturity. It was still a larva, white and soft and pulpy. But the sun would dry and warm it. Harden its shell. Turn it dark and strong. It would emerge from its cocoon, and one day when his mother came by the garage . . .

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Behind the mother-thing were other pulpy white larvae, recently laid by the bug. Small. Just coming into existence. He could see where the father-thing had broken off; the place where it had grown. It had matured here. And in the garage, his father had met it.

Charles began to move numbly away, past the rotting boards, the filth and debris, the pulpy mushroom larvae. Weakly, he reached out to take hold of the fence — and scrambled back.

Another one. Another larva. He hadn't seen this one, at first. It wasn't white. It had already turned dark. The web, the pulpy softness, the moistness, were gone. It was ready. It stirred a little, moved its arm feebly.

The Charles-thing.

The bamboo separated, and the father-thing's hand clamped firmly around the boy's wrist. "You stay right here," it said. "This is exactly the place for you. Don't move." With its other hand it tore at the remains of the cocoon binding the Charles-thing. "I'll help it out — it's still a little weak."

The last shred of moist gray was stripped back, and the Charles-thing tottered out. It floundered uncertainly, as the father-thing cleared a path for it toward Charles.

"This way," the father-thing grunted. "I'll hold him for you. When you've fed you'll be stronger."

The Charles-thing's mouth opened and closed. It reached greedily toward Charles. The boy struggled wildly, but the father-thing's immense hand held him down.

"Stop that, young man," the father-thing commanded. "It'll be a lot easier for you if you —"

It screamed and convulsed. It let go of Charles and staggered back. Its body twitched violently. It crashed against the garage, limbs jerking. For a time it rolled and flopped in a dance of agony. It whimpered, moaned, tried to crawl away. Gradually it became quiet. The Charles-thing settled down in a silent heap. It lay stupidly among the bamboo and rotting debris, body slack, face empty and blank.

At last the father-thing ceased to stir. There was only the faint rustle of the bamboo in the night wind.

Charles got up awkwardly. He stepped down onto the cement driveway. Peretti and Daniels approached, wide-eyed and cautious. "Don't go near it," Daniels ordered sharply. "It ain't dead yet. Takes a little while."

"What did you do?" Charles muttered.

Daniels set down the drum of kerosene with a gasp of relief. "Found this in the garage. We Daniels always used kerosene on our mosquitoes, back in Virginia."

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"Daniels poured kerosene down the bug's tunnel," Peretti explained, still awed. "It was his idea."

Daniels kicked cautiously at the contorted body of the father-thing. "It's dead, now. Died as soon as the bug died."

"I guess the others'll die, too," Peretti said. He pushed aside the bamboo to examine the larvae growing here and there among the debris. The Charles-thing didn't move at all, as Peretti jabbed the end of a stick into its chest. "This one's dead."

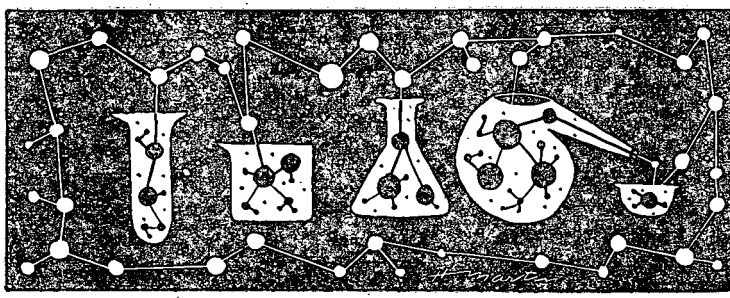
"We better make sure," Daniels said grimly. He picked up the heavy drum of kerosene and lugged it to the edge of the bamboo. "It dropped some matches in the driveway. You get them, Peretti."

They looked at each other.

"Sure," Peretti said softly.

"We better turn on the hose," Charles said. "To make sure it doesn't spread."

"Let's get going," Peretti said impatiently. He was already moving off. Charles quickly followed him and they began searching for the matches, in the moonlit darkness.



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Ellery Queen once introduced a fine wine-bibbing story by Dorothy Sayers with the words, "Chiefly we liked A Matter of Taste *because it made us thirsty." But I commend to you John Novotny's* The Bourbon Lake *as excelling that adventure of Lord Peter Wimsey, and indeed even surpassing* TORTILLA FLAT, *as the most amiably thirstifying story I know. If you can finish this without a glass in your hand, you're a strong man — and one to be pitied.*

The Bourbon Lake

by JOHN NOVOTNY

"'Tis A VACATION we're beginning, Michael, not an auto race," admonished Mary. Michael Flynn's foot obediently retreated on the accelerator and the near scenery became visible as the car slowed down.

"Was that a route marker?"

"Slow it down a bit more, Mike," said James O'Hannion, "and I'll watch for the next. Eileen, my dear, will you examine the map again?"

"Perhaps you'll examine it yourself, Mr. O'Hannion," said Eileen. "More complaints I've never heard than the last time I examined it."

"You know very well my glasses are packed in the trunk," said James O'Hannion. "Just hold it right side up, Eileen, and look for Stroudsburg."

"Is it near Provincetown?" asked Eileen after diligent examining. "That would be Route Six."

"Is there blue all around it?" asked James sweetly.

"Yes," said the happy Eileen.

"Well, that's the Atlantic Ocean, and you're on Cape Cod," said James. "Eileen, my sweet, just because you're holding the map flat on your lap does not mean your finger must travel toward the front of the car."

"But that's the direction we're going."

"Then turn the map around and read the names of the towns upside down, Eileen, my dear!"

"Glasses or no glasses, you can take the —"

"Stroudsburg, Mrs. O'Hannion," said Michael hopefully. Eileen com-

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pressed her lips, glared at her husband, and bent over the map again. Mary leaned over and helped. Finally, they turned the map around and began pushing their fingers toward the front of the car. James sighed and looked at the road ahead.

"Trenton?" ventured Mary.

"Stroudsburg," repeated Michael. "But you're getting close."

"Did you check to see if I have enough underwear?" asked O'Hannion, suddenly worried about the safety of a small bottle that he had secreted in his bag. Eileen looked up from the map.

"Yes, Jim," she said sweetly. "You'll have enough. I took out one little item and was able to squeeze in two more sets."

"That was most thoughtful," O'Hannion murmured, sinking lower until his head rested on the back of the seat. Neon flashes of red and yellow reflected in the windshield and then fled past them on the right, disappearing into the blackness. "I wonder if the boys are at Casey's now," he mused.

"You'll not miss them for two weeks," said Eileen.

"Two weeks," whispered O'Hannion mournfully. "And me with only underwear in me bag."

"Did you find Stroudsburg?" Michael demanded.

Early the next morning, James O'Hannion and Michael Flynn were ejected from their respective doors of the big double cabin.

"A walk, you say!" Michael glared at Mary who, arms folded, barred the door against his return to bed. "A walk can be a dangerous thing. A man must work his way into these vacations gradually. A fast walk at this stage of the game is liable to set me poor heart to beating something scandalous and do more harm than good."

"Then take a slow walk," advised Mary.

"And don't head for the nearest tavern," added Eileen, stepping out onto the porch.

"No worry there," said Mary Flynn, laughing. The men looked at her suspiciously.

"Have you lost your mind?" asked Eileen. "These are our husbands."

"While they carried the suitcases in last night, I had a little talk with Mr. Drummond," explained Mary. "After asking about linen and food facilities, I inquired about saloons. There isn't a one on any road around here. He said no tavern was ever able to exist in this vicinity."

James reached out to steady himself against the porch and Michael's mouth dropped open.

"No taverns," mourned Michael.

"Away with you," said Eileen. "Ponder the unhappy news while you

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walk, if you will. Mary and I have to pay our respects to the neighbors."

The stunned men turned slowly and trudged away into the bright Saturday sunlight. The path led past other cabins and circled toward a souvenir shop and small restaurant. There it divided, one side heading for tennis courst and a volleyball area, the other branching off toward the woods and fields. Michael and James stopped at the fork.

"Would you be caring for a brisk tussle of volleyball?" asked Michael forlornly.

"I would not," said James. "Now a good game of shuffleboard at Casey's —"

"We should have investigated beforehand," said Michael.

"Who would think it?" said James. "A vacation place with no saloon. A man could die of thirst. Michael, my old friend, two gentlemen are about to play tennis. Watching them will make me sweat. Let's try this path."

They walked slowly, in single file, heads bowed and feet kicking up dust. The dirt path became grassy and they wandered through woods and up and down hills. It was on the summit of one of the hills that James stopped and grasped Michael's arm.

"Me mind is playing tricks on me," he said. "The miserable thoughts I've been thinking have made something snap."

"What makes you say that?" asked Michael.

"I just smelled Casey's," said James.

"I don't suppose the women would consider cutting the vacation short if we convinced them you were going crazy," muttered Michael.

"Hallucinations. I never thought it would happen to an O'Hannion," whispered James.

Deep in thought, they resumed walking. Michael led the way along the narrow path and, when he stopped suddenly, James walked into his back.

"What is it?"

" 'Tis catching, James," said Michael, sniffing the air.

"Casey's?"

Michael nodded and James quickly elevated his nose and began sniffing deeply.

"Hard to tell," said James. "Something seems to dilute the odor."

"Fresh air, apparently," said Michael.

"Sh-h," cautioned James. "I have the scent."

"Might our reasoning be wrong?" he wondered. "Perhaps there is a tavern in the neighborhood and Mr. Drummond does not know it. Hold the scent, James boy. As of this moment, you are our bird dog. Fetch."

James O'Hannion started forward. Michael followed closely. They walked briskly, like men with a purpose in life.

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" 'Tis no bird dog I'm needing now," said Michael, twitching his nose. "This is the strongest smelling tavern I have ever met."

The odor of whisky hung heavily in the air and the two men were running as they came over a small rise in the land. No tavern graced the foreground. Instead they faced a pretty lake surrounded by woods.

"We must be crazy, Michael," said James. "Our minds have snapped at the same instant."

"At least we will go together."

" 'Tis not only my nose, but my eyes that have gone back on me," said James. "It was always my belief that lakes are blue."

"Have you ever seen one before?"

"In the park."

"Ha!" scoffed Michael. "A tame lake. This is a wild lake. There's no reason why they shouldn't come in different colors."

"Very pretty, it is. Sort of a reddish, deep amberish color."

They walked to the shore line and breathed deeply.

"Wild lakes smell better than park lakes," said James. "Look over there. Nature for sure."

He pointed along the shore line where a tree grew at the edge of the lake. A beaver sat against the tree. His broad tail spread out before him, he rested on his rump, and his back leaned against the trunk of the tree. Occasionally, the animal dipped a paw into the lake and then brought it to its mouth. Then the paw was licked diligently and thoroughly.

"What kind of a beast is it?" asked O'Hannion.

"Perhaps we can sneak up on it and examine it at close range," said Michael. Immediately, he began to tiptoe toward the animal. James followed him. The beaver watched them approach. It closed its eyes to mere slits and waited. The men stood on each side staring down at it.

"I have been led to believe that wild beasts can easily sense the approach of human beings. This one appears to be sleeping." Michael glared at the beaver. James knelt and peered into the beaver's face. Slowly, the animal opened and closed one eye.

"He winked at me," James announced.

"Your insanity has gone beyond safe limits. Beasts like this do not wink. Sit still, me boy."

Michael dipped his cupped hands into the lake.

"Drink," he urged. "Perhaps it will clear your head."

James obediently sipped from his friend's hands. He licked his lips and frowned.

"Do you think you could dip me a tiny bit more?"

Michael obliged and James sipped again. Then he groaned.

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"Order the strait jacket, Michael, old friend. I am completely gone."

Michael and the beaver studied James.

"Why do you say that?" asked Michael.

"The lake water tastes like bourbon," whispered James.

He leaned forward and dipped some up with his own hands.

"Bourbon," he said definitely.

Michael quickly tried some and immediately sat on the other side of the beaver. After five minutes of concerted dipping by the three of them, the beaver rolled himself forward, stumbled over O'Hannion's feet, and ambled away.

"Drunk," observed James. Michael nodded between dips.

After ten minutes had passed, Michael leaned back against the tree and studied the scene.

"Mr. O'Hannion, observe the size of this fine body of bourbon. 'Tis not necessary to dip so fast. We shall not run out."

"You're right," said James. "There is tomorrow to think of. And the day after that."

"And two delightful weeks. Even applying ourselves to the task, I doubt we'll make much of a dent in it."

Late in the afternoon, arm in arm, they weaved up the little rise in the land and headed back along the path.

"Memorize every living bush," cautioned Michael.

"Those that I can see," muttered James.

When they finally reached the fork in the path near the tennis courts they stopped.

"It is an unhappy fact that the length of the trip has a bit of a sobering action," observed Flynn.

"Perhaps that is for the best," said James. "It would never do for our wives to decide to leave this Utopia in the woods."

"A wise thought. And tomorrow we must remember to bring paper cups. Me hand doesn't hold a satisfactory amount."

"A lake of bourbon," sighed James happily. "You know, 'twas only last Sunday that Father Riley was saying that he felt I would have a wonderful time on my vacation. I wonder how he knew?"

"A fine man, Father Riley. I don't doubt for a moment that he prayed for us," said Michael. "I am almost out of peppermints, James. Tomorrow morning we will buy more in the restaurant."

They walked briskly along the path to the cabin. Eileen and Mary were on the big porch.

"The wanderers return," said Eileen. "We thought you might have considered a suicide pact after hearing the unhappy news."

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"To what do you have reference, Mrs. O'Hannion?" asked Michael.

"I refer to the absence of a bar, Mr. Flynn."

"A bar?" said James, in a surprised voice. "Do you mean to imply that we are incapable of existing without a bar?"

"You've never managed to exist without one before," said Eileen. "And you needn't act surprised."

"When you're out in the woods communing with nature, there is no need for stimulants," said Michael.

"Communing," echoed Mary Flynn sarcastically. " 'Tis a Boy Scout I've married. Did you find the moss on the trees?"

"It may be of interest to you to know that on this very day James and I studied a beast at close hand," Michael told her.

"I've done that myself for a number of years," said Mary.

"Make fun if you will," said James. "This beast was a very fine example of nature. Small and furry. Perhaps a mink."

"Then maybe you can trap a fur coat for me," said Eileen. "But one thing, I'm glad you're seeing small furry beasts instead of snakes and pink elephants."

Mary and Eileen had little trouble getting Michael and James out of the cabin the next morning. The two men enjoyed their breakfast and then announced intentions of going for another walk. Before their wives had recovered from the shock, Michael and James were in the small restaurant near the fork in the path. There they put in a supply of peppermints, sandwiches, and paper cups. Then they started along the trail that led to the bourbon lake.

"Let's take our time, James, lad. Drinking too early in the morning is supposed to be unhealthy," Michael said.

"That is probably a rumor started by our wives," answered James. "But you're right. There's no need to hurry."

They strolled leisurely through the woods, here nodding a cordial good morning to a busy robin, and here shouting a gay "Hello!" to a startled rabbit. Every so often, one of them would elevate his nose and sniff deeply. Then he would smile, nod happily to the other, and both would step forward with confidence. The bourbon lake was waiting, covered with sunlit amber ripples, as they came over the last hill.

"Beautiful," breathed Michael.

"Like a dream," said James.

They walked to the tree by the whisky's edge and looked for their friend. The beaver wasn't around, so they settled down and made themselves comfortable. Admirably, they refrained from immediately breaking into the

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carton of paper cups. The sun was warm and they closed their eyes. Half an hour later, a myopic kingfisher flew overhead and thought he saw something swimming in the strangely colored lake. The splash of his sudden dive awakened Michael, who opened his eyes just in time to watch the bedraggled bird break the surface and try to hoist himself into the air. His tail feathers dragged alarmingly, and, after struggling for 30 feet, the kingfisher settled on the shore. The bird turned and examined this strange lake. Slowly and suspiciously, he lowered his long beak into the liquid and then tilted back his plumed head. As Michael watched, the bird rose into the air, circled over the lake, closed his wings, and dove. Michael closed his eyes as the bird disappeared in a golden spray of sun and bourbon.

"Much too early," he muttered.

On Wednesday afternoon, James and Michael had a bad moment. They were barely into their second cupful when it began to rain. They huddled under the tree and glared at the shower.

"Do you realize what it's doing?" asked James.

"I do," answered Michael. "It's dy-luting the bourbon."

"And yet, it must have happened before."

"Perfectly true, but I don't particularly care for the idea."

When the rain eased up, they hesitantly tried the cups again. Their smiles returned.

"It must be a very fine brand to defy the elements and retain its flavor and body," breathed Michael reverently.

"Besides," observed James, "it would take a lot of rain to turn this lake into a highball."

On Thursday, they watched a deer run into the lake to avoid hounds that bayed in the distance. The animal got in as far as his knees and then stopped. He dipped his muzzle into the amber fluid and jerked his head back. A second try provided a longer drink. The third drink did it. The noise of the dogs was much louder as the deer stalked out of the lake, testing the weight of his antlers. The baying of the two hounds turned into joyous yelps as they burst out of the foliage and saw their quarry facing them. But before they were halfway to him they realized that, for the first time in their long careers, they were confronted by a different end of the animal. The end that they saw was coming instead of going, had pointed horns instead of a white flag, and wore a hungry, undeerlike gleam in its eyes. The two dogs halted abruptly and looked around anxiously for their owner. Unfortunately, he was far behind them, so they hurried back for further instructions. The deer rumbled after them, but suddenly remembered the lake, and turned to investigate the neighborhood with a view toward making it his permanent abode.

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On Friday, James and Michael had another visitor. It was Mr. Drummond, proprietor of their vacation spot. He walked slowly along the shore line and settled down beside the two drinkers. The Scotsman removed his cap, selected a cup, and helped himself to a good portion of the lake.

"So you've found our lake," he said softly.

"That we have," said Michael.

"Aye," said Mr. Drummond.

There was a long silence while the three of them took on fuel.

"And now you can under-r-stand why no taver-r-n can make good in this neighborhood."

"That we can," said James.

"Aye," said Mr. Drummond.

"We walked around the lake," Michael said, "and we saw no stream leading into it. It is something I would like to see — a stream of bourbon."

"Aye," mused Mr. Drummond. "But you won't see it. This lake comes out of the ground. We have figur-r-ed that somewhere below is a deposit of decayed vegetation. Instead of becoming oil, this vegetation fer-r-mented and distilled itself ver-r-y obligingly into good liquor."

"What a wonderful thing Nature is," marveled O'Hannion, reaching out with his cup.

"You like bourbon," observed Mr. Drummond.

"Considerably," said James.

"You picked the right year to visit with us," said Mr. Drummond. "Each year it is different. Some time next Friday, all this bourbon will run back into the gr-r-ound. It is a phenomenon that happens ever-r-y year on the same date, a convenient arrangement for last-minute filling of jugs and gallon jars. Then, ear-r-ly in the spring, the lake fills up again."

"A day of great rejoicing, I imagine," said Michael.

"Aye," said Mr. Drummond. "And suspense. You see, each year the lake changes. A differ-r-ent liquor."

"You don't say," said James.

Mr. Drummond looked at him.

"A differ-r-ent liquor," he repeated.

"What was last year?" asked James.

"Irish," said Mr. Drummond.

There was a silence beneath the tree. Finally Michael spoke.

"A year late we are. In the midst of all this happiness I feel a great sadness. Perhaps I am ungrateful, but Irish whisky —"

"Don't be too unhappy," said Mr. Drummond, grinning. "Irish may come again next year. But if it follows the schedule — no."

"Schedule?" asked Michael.

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"Aye," said Mr. Drummond. "We figur-r-e that the differ-r-ent pools beneath the surface require a certain number of years in which to renew themselves. For a number of years they have been following in turn with few exceptions."

"What is due next year?" asked James.

"Applejack," said Mr. Drummond happily.

Michael and James nodded approvingly.

"We will be back."

"Unless your wives hear about it," observed Mr. Drummond slyly, refilling his cup.

"Is there danger of their hearing about it?" asked Michael.

"I'm afr-r-aid there is," said Mr. Drummond. "Unfortunately, the women of the vicinity are aware of the lake. They are likely to mention it."

"We will tackle that problem when it rears its ugly head," said Michael.

"Fine," said Mr. Drummond. "Do you have another cup handy? This one has spr-r-ung a leak."

When Michael and James weaved their way back to the cabin, they found Eileen and Mary in excellent spirits.

"We had a fine time today," bubbled Eileen. "A party we were invited to. And Mrs. Drummond served a delicious punch."

"Punch?" whispered Michael.

"Yes," gurgled Mary. "It was called Old Fashioneds."

Michael passed his hand over his eyes.

"The crisis is almost upon us, James boy," he whispered.

The crisis arrived on Monday morning. Mary and Eileen had spent the week end exploring all the delights of the punch called Old Fashioneds. On Monday, however, they found themselves in the swamp all such explorers must cross. Mary woke up holding her head. Half an hour later, she compared notes with Eileen.

"I feel exactly the way Michael has looked on occasion," she wailed.

"Is your hair pressing down on the top of your head like mine?" asked Eileen unhappily.

"I wonder if we were drinking whisky?" Mary groaned.

Michael and James watched unhappily from the door.

"This is quite liable to create a bad effect in Eileen's subconscious," whispered James.

" 'Tis Mary's conscious I am worrying about," said Michael.

The women squinted against the sunlight toward the big Drummond cabin and then at Michael and James.

"Don't leave until we get back," ordered Mary. "Understand?"

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Michael nodded quickly and the wives hurried away. The men sat on the porch steps.

"Is this the end?"

"We must meet it bravely, if it is," said Michael.

" 'Tis a coward I am, Michael. I feel like throwing myself into the lake and never coming up again."

"A beautiful thought, James boy, but we are men. We must face this thing like men. Forget the lake."

"Forget the lake?" asked James, astounded. "Sacrilege! I could as soon blow up Casey's."

"Would you torture yourself by remembering?" asked Michael. "When our wives return —"

He stopped suddenly and stared toward the Drummond cabin. Mr. Drummond was helping Mary and Eileen down the porch steps. He pointed them toward their own place and propelled gently. Eileen walked a few steps, then turned and blew a kiss to the little Scotsman. Gallantly, he returned the motion. She spun again and endeavored to walk completely over Mary, who stood, with crossed eyes, contemplating a big yellow butterfly that hovered an inch beyond her nose. The insect was fascinated by the aroma that Mary exhaled. As Eileen walked into her, Mary let out her breath; the butterfly folded its wings and joyfully collapsed. The women laughed and, arm in arm, strode at various angles toward the cabin. Their husbands rose slowly, unable to speak because their mouths were open too wide.

" 'Twas nothing serious, Jimmy dear," called Eileen.

"Nothing that couldn't be cured by a wonderful morning drink," hummed Mary. "It has a funny name. The hair —"

"— of the dog," said James and Michael in unison.

"That's it," whooped Mary. She and Eileen laughed until they nearly fell down. The men led them to wicker chairs. Michael motioned with his head and, a few minutes later, James followed him around the side of the cabin.

"We have been delivered," Michael announced. "Father Riley must have worked overtime."

"While I do not approve of women making fools of themselves with drink," observed James, "the question arises, how are we going to keep them this way?"

Eileen's voice floated harmoniously around the corner.

"Jimmy! Jim-m-my! Can you hear me, dear?"

"Yes — dear," called James.

"Before you take your walk, please carry our Thermos jug over to Mr.

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Drub — to Mr. Drummond's. He promised to fill it up to the brim with punch. You won't forget, will you?"

"No, Eileen. I won't forget," James called happily.

"To the brim," Mary repeated.

"The brim," Michael said.

When they reached the lake, they found Mr. Drummond and the beaver seated by the tree. The beaver, grumbling a bit, moved over to make room for the newcomers.

"Pardon me," said James, leaning forward with his paper cup. The beaver closed its eyes resignedly until the man leaned back out of its way.

"Mr. Drummond," Michael said, "we have much to thank you for."

"Aye," agreed the smiling Mr. Drummond. "Our cour-r-rse is clear. The remainder of your stay will be a happy one, I'm sure."

"Let us drink to that," said James.

The three men and the beaver dipped into the bourbon lake.

"About our reservations for next year," began Michael.

"Your wives took care of that this mor-r-ning when they came over for the cure."

By 4 o'clock all of them could stand, but only one could walk. That was the beaver, and he fell into the lake on his way to his dam.

The Wife's Return

He put hot arsenic in my eggs,
And like a hog I shoveled them in.
First I retched and next I died —
I swallowed the eggs, I did.

I hitched with thumb
And hiked by legs,
Till I found a door on the Other Side,
And the sign said: "Perish forbid!"
So, hippity-hoppity, here I come
With egg all over my chin!

WINONA McCLINTIC

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INDEX TO VOLUME SEVEN — JULY 1954–DECEMBER 1954

ABERNATHY, ROBERT: The Fishers...Dec. 3
ASIMOV, ISAAC: The Foundation of S.F. Success (verse).....Oct. 69
BARR, ROBERT: The Doom of London.....July 25
BEAUMONT, CHARLES: The Quadriopticon.....Aug. 93
BESTER, ALFRED: Fondly Fahrenheit.Aug. 3
BROOKBANK, RICHARD: The Invisible Wall.....Aug. 61
BROUGHTON, RHODA: The Man With the Nose.....Oct. 38
BUCK, DORIS P.: Two-Bit Oracle...Aug. 81
CLINGERMAN, MILDRED: Letters from Laura.....Oct. 122
COPPEL, ALFRED: Mars Is Ours.....Oct. 108
DAVIDSON, AVRAM: My Boy Friend's Name Is Jello.....July 61
DE CAMP, L. SPRAGUE, AND PRATT, FLETCHER: The Weissenbroch Spectacles.....Nov. 119
DEFORD, MIRIAM ALLEN: Frustrated Frankenstein: Alfonso Herrera and His Colpoids (article).....Aug. 55
DE MONCRIF, FRANÇOIS AUGUSTIN PARADIS (translated by R. Bretnor): The Cat, the Brahmin and the Penitent.....Dec. 68
DICK, PHILIP K.: The Father-Thing.Dec. 105
DICKSON, GORDON R.: A Case History.....Dec. 63
DRAKE, LEAH BODINE: The Gods of the Dana (verse).....July 60
DUNSANY, LORD: Misadventure.....Oct. 91
ELLIS, H. F.: Space-Crime Continuum.....Sept. 66
FARMER, PHILIP JOSÉ: Totem and Taboo.....Dec. 99
FINNEY, JACK: There Is a Tide.....Sept. 115
FRIBORG, ALBERT COMPTON: Careless Love.....July 43
GARRETT, RANDALL: Infinite Resources.....July 114
GRIMES, LEE: Lease on Life.....Nov. 42
GRINNELL, DAVID: The Lysenko Maze.....July 118
HAMILTON, EDMOND: Sacrifice Hit...Nov. 100
HEINLEIN, ROBERT A.: Star Lummox (conclusion).....July 65
HENDERSON, ZENNA: Gilead.....Aug. 28
HENEKSON, GLEN: Wish for the Moon.....Dec. 94
HEWISON, R. J. P.: Genius (verse)..Dec. 67
HOLDING, ELISABETH SANXAY: Shadow of Wings.....July 3
JAKES, JOHN: Crack-Up.....Sept. 95
KNEALE, NIGEL: Peg.....Oct. 98
LEE, EDWARD: Kalato.....Dec. 49
MATHESON, RICHARD: The Test....Nov. 54
MCCLINTIC, WINONA: The Wife's return (verse).....Dec. 126
MCCOMAS, J. FRANCIS: Brave New Word.....Sept. 70
MCINTOSH, J. T.: One Too Many...Sept. 3
MERRIL, JUDITH: Dead Center.....Nov. 3
MOORE, WARD: Lot's Daughter.....Oct. 3
MORRISON, WILLIAM: There Ought to Be a Lore.....Sept. 99
Music of the Sphere.....Oct. 70
The Ardent Soul.....Dec. 71
MUDGETT, HERMAN W.: The Sexual Behavior of the Extra-Sensory Perceptor (verse).....Aug. 92
NOVOTNY, JOHN: The Angry Peter Brindle.....Oct. 28
The Bourbon Lake.....Dec. 116
OLIVER, CHAD: Transformer.....Nov. 70
PHILLIPS, PETER: FMITM.....Sept. 82
PORGES, ARTHUR: The Devil and Simon Flagg.....Aug. 22
The Grom.....Nov. 36
PRATT, FLETCHER AND DE CAMP, L. SPRAGUE: The Weissenbroch Spectacles.....Nov. 119
REYNOLDS, MACK: Prone.....Sept. 85
RIGSBY, HOWARD: One Fine Day...Sept. 112
ROGERS, KAY: Command Performance.....Aug. 70
SAKI: The Seventh Pullet.....Dec. 43
SHANGO, J. R.: A Matter of Ethics..Nov. 82
SHECKLEY, ROBERT: The Accountant.July 35
The Slow Season.....Oct. 63
SIEGEL, LARRY: Dead-Eye Daniel...Nov. 26
SMITH, CLARK ASHTON: A Prophecy of Monsters.....Oct. 119
SMITH, EVELYN E.: At Last I've Found You.....Oct. 54
SPRINGER, SHERWOOD: Epitaph in Avalon (verse).....July 42
STANTON, WILL: The Girl in the Flaxen Convertible.....Oct. 102
TOWNES, ROBERT SHERMAN: Time and Place.....Dec. 84
WEBB, CHARLES: Special Talent.....Dec. 38
WELLMAN, MANLY WADE: The Little Black Train.....Aug. 114
WOLF, LEONARD: Some Facts About Robots (verse).....July 24
Robot Lonely (verse).....Oct. 37
Rules for an Invasion (verse).....Oct. 118

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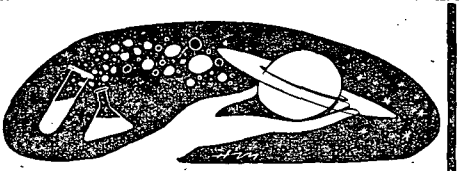

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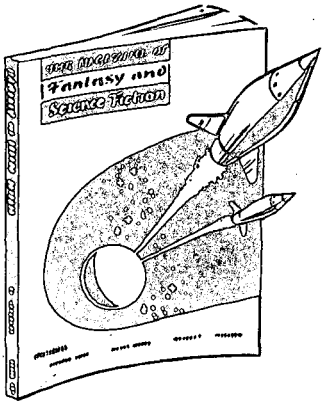

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